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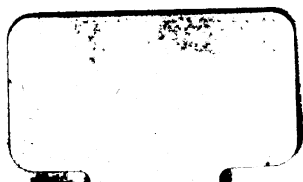
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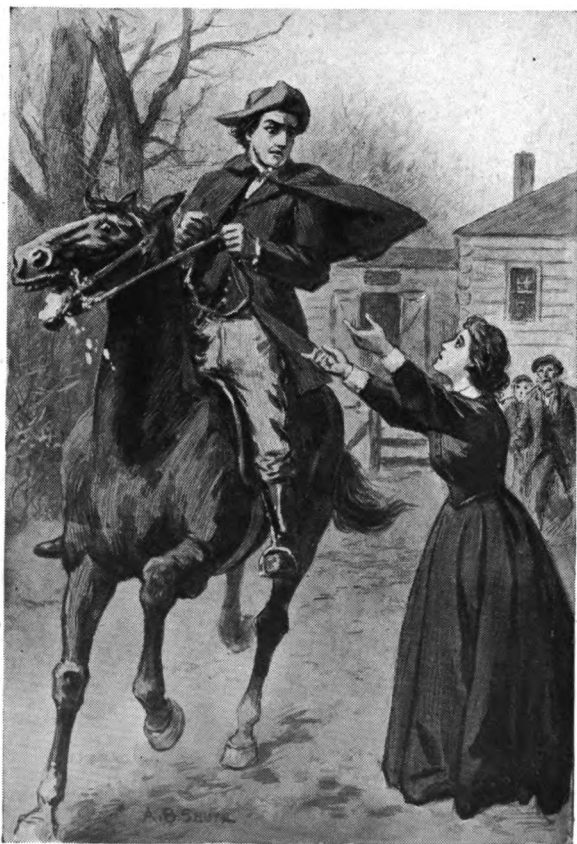
The Kentuckian

James Ball Naylor, C.M. Clark Publishing Co

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The Kentuckian



“Wait,” she pleaded. “For my sake, Vance!
For my sake.”

The **KENTUCKIAN**

**A Thrilling Tale of Ohio Life
in the Early Sixties**

By
JAMES BALL NAYLOR
Author of "RALPH MARLOWE"

Illustrations by
A. B. SHUTE



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Published in November, 1905

DEDICATION

**To James Robert Naylor, "the Laddie Abiding
With Me", this tale of sterling manhood is
fondly dedicated, by his loving father—**

JAMES BALL NAYLOR

**Malta, Ohio
Nov. 18th, 1905**

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THE KENTUCKIAN

CHAPTER I

It all happened almost half a century ago—when I was a lad of tender years. Looking back to that distant day, and comparing myself of now with myself of then, and noting the many changes in men and things, it seems long, long ago. Yet the seasons have succeeded one another and fled with ever-increasing swiftness; and the interval between youth and age has been but a span.

Adown the vista of years, scenes and events appear hazy and ill-defined—with here and there a human face or form standing out with startling distinctness; but, as I gaze, above all rises a bright picture—the picture of a woman's pure love triumphant over all the mighty hosts of wrong!

A part of the tale I shall tell I lived and experienced; a larger part I have learned from the lips of the actors themselves, or from the lips of persons who watched the drama, as I did. Many things that at the time I did not comprehend or understand, in the light of mature wisdom appear simple and plain. And, as I write, I find the fog lifting, the shadows disappearing; and what were dim recollections become vivid present realities.

On the morning of that memorable November day that Vance Chatham came into our lives—Vance

Chatham and his thoroughbred, Kaintuck, the finest piece of horseflesh I have ever seen—Bill Kirk was preparing to take a load of grain to the mill at Eagle dam. My father had given me permission to go along; and, with the ardor and elation of a boy of twelve, I was aiding in the preparations for departure. I held open the sacks while Bill shoveled the wheat and corn into them, and narrowly observed the deft fashion in which he shook down the grain, puckered the yawning mouths of the bags, and knotted the cords in place. I nimbly clambered into the great bed of the Connestoga wagon—a bed built like a boat, high and narrow at front and rear and low and wide in the middle—and, puffing and grunting, pulled and hauled the heavy sacks into place, as Bill carried them from the granary and dumped them in to me.

He was not a large man, but was muscular and wiry; and I recall that I greatly admired the easy, skillful way in which he shouldered each heavy burden, set his arms akimbo, and strutted stiffly erect like a militiaman on parade.

“There!” he panted, when the final sack had found a resting-place in the big wagon-bed. “That’s what the shoemaker threwed at his wife—the last an’ all.” And, winking his one eye at me, he scratched his bearded chin with his clubbed fingers.

What a homely face Bill had—yet how full of kindness! His short sandy beard—each hair standing rigidly apart from its fellows—grew high on cheeks and temples, almost concealing his single eye,

and accentuating the depression caused by the loss of the other; and his wide mouth was crowded with irregular, discolored teeth. But his smile was a benediction—an overflow of good nature from his big, sunny heart!

My father led a saddled horse out of the stable, and placing a foot in the stirrup turned and said crabbedly:

“Hurry up and git started, Kirk—’r you won’t ever git back. The road’s mighty bad.”

Then he mounted and rode away to salt the cattle upon a distant part of the place.

“Git back some time ’fore resurrection mornin’, I reckon,” Bill muttered testily. “Come on, Tom; le’s harness up.”

To the barn we went. As he threw the harness upon the backs of the horses I knotted the thongs of the clumsy wooden hames and buckled the broad bellybands. Soon they were ready, and we led them forth—two spans, fat, sleek and shiny.

While we were hitching, Tildy Cramblett, the hired help, came up to the wagon, an armload of old quilts and comforters hugged to her portly person.

“Here’s some bedclo’es, Bill Kirk,” she remarked, “to cover up the millin’ in case it rains. I want you to keep these comforts clean, too; they’re heavy to wash.”

“All righty!” Bill replied cheerily, chucking her under the chin; and with a shambling, antic gait he danced away from her. “You bet I’ll keep ’em clean, Tildy. You an’ me’ll need ’em when we go to housekeepin’.”

"Oh, take 'em, you fool!" she snapped, her black eyes flashing angrily. "Don't stand there grinnin' like a chessy-cat. Talkin' 'bout me marryin'! I wouldn't marry the best man on top o' ground—let alone you, you dried-up forty-year-old bach'lor."

"Hoity-toity!" laughed Bill, as he threw a saddle upon the nigh wheel horse and fastened the girth. "Gittin' on y'r dignity, ain't you, Tildy? Throw them quilts upon the top o' the load. You might take y'r eggs to a worse market, Tildy—'n to marry me. I ain't much older 'n you, I reckon. You ain't no spring chicken—fair, fat and forty jest about ketches you. An' I'm dead in love with you, Tildy—you know I am."

"Oh, shut up!" she cried, laughing explosively, her fat sides shaking.

Then, sobering instantly, she wheeled and waddled toward the house.

When Bill had mounted the saddle horse and I had found a secure perch upon the heaped load and we were just ready to start upon our trip, then it was that Ruth came running out to us and handed me a covered basket.

"What's in it?" I asked.

"What's in it? Why, Tom Gaston!"

Placing her small brown hands upon her hips, she threw back her queenly head and laughed merrily, dimpling her pink cheeks and revealing her white, even teeth.

"What's in it!" she repeated when she could command her voice. "Tom, it's the first time I ever

knew you to lose sight of your main object in life. Your dinner's in the basket—bread and meat, and pie and pickles. See that you get your share. Bill will eat everything, if you don't look out; and a certain freckle-faced boy with red hair and two big butter teeth will have to go hungry."

And again she laughed.

I looked down at her from my high perch—her face upturned to mine. How beautiful I thought her! She was seventeen, but quite a woman. Her luxuriant hair was dark-brown and glossy. Her large eyes matched her hair, and in them was the light of latent power for good or evil—wanton witchery and melting tenderness, love and hate. She was small and slender, but her head was proudly poised and unconscious grace was in her every movement.

Ruth Gaston was sister and mother to me, in one. In my short life I had known no love like hers. No love *but* hers would be nearer the truth. For my mother had died when I was a baby; and my father was a coarse, unemotional man who had neither love nor sympathy to lavish upon anyone. I dislike to say of John Gaston, the author of my existence, what I am about to record; and yet the truth must out—and as well here as elsewhere. He was a man who spent his life in the pursuit of gain and in the gratification of his animal appetites. He was bluff and gruff, hale and hearty—a great feeder and a heavy drinker. He was a magnificent animal; a hospitable host; a bold, shrewd, aggressive man. That is the best I can say of him. But he was

wholly unrefined, and had scant sense of common honesty, gratitude, or honor. A lewd story pleased him more than a beautiful poem; and the jingle of coins meant more to his sordid soul than a national anthem. Profane, witless and coarse-fibered, his smooth-shaven, flabby features and small pig-like eyes reflected his real character. He had many acquaintances, but few fast friends. Yet he provided well for those dependent upon him; and with this he considered that he had done his whole duty. I cannot recall that he ever abused me; nor can I recall that he ever gave me a gentle word or a caress. He did better by his favorite horse, for he whipped and petted it by turns. I did not love him; I did not fear him. I did not respect him, even. How could I? God pity me! It is a terrible revelation to make; but it is the solemn truth!

I blush as I read what I have written. But the story I shall tell will serve in the way of justification.

Our home was in the hill country of southeastern Ohio, upon Limestone creek, two miles from its junction with the Muskingum. At this point the river ran due south, the smaller stream coming into it from the west; and at their confluence stood a dilapidated, picturesque salt manufactory known far and near as Colby's furnace.

My father's farm consisted of six hundred acres of hill and bottom land, about half of it virgin forest. The house—a double-hewed log structure with a frame ell—stood a few hundred feet from the north bank of the creek. It was two-storied, with

immense outside chimneys of dressed stone; and it faced down the stream.

Here the creek valley was narrow; but a short distance above it widened into a great amphitheater surrounded by wooded hills. Immediately north of our house ran the country road; and just across it were the barns, granary and other farm buildings—with the hills at their back gently sloping up to the tobacco fields.

To this home my parents and Ruth had come fourteen years prior to the time of which I write. In this house I had been born; and in it my mother, a delicate woman of education and refinement, had fretted and died—broken-hearted over my father's doings and purposes. I cannot remember her. Instead a dim recollection comes to me—a recollection of my earliest consciousness; and I see myself, a mere child, playing in the sand under the spreading apple tree at the corner of the house, watched and tended by a red-cheeked, bare-footed girl.

Something of what I have just written was in my mind on that crisp November morning so far adown the years, as Ruth stood smiling up at me, her hands upon her shapely hips.

“Good-by, Tom,” I heard her say.

Then I sat dumbly looking after her, as she tripped to the house and with a wave of the hand disappeared indoors.

Bill Kirk jerked the single line and clucked to the leaders, and away we rolled down the valley. For a distance the road was hard and smooth, and we bowled along at a merry pace. Bill jiggled up and

down in the saddle in a comical manner, making me laugh aloud as I bounced to the jolting of the heavy vehicle. Above the rumble and clatter of the revolving wheels I could hear him singing:

“She threw away her iv’ry combs,
Tied up her silken hair,
An’ out o’ the room this fair lady went,
Never to return any more.”

Presently we came to where the road approached the creek and ran through a strip of marshy land that was frequently overflowed by the small but erratic stream. The broad-tired wheels sank deep into the soft earth, and our progress was now slow. Bill whistled and clucked and cracked his blacksnake whip by turns, as we wound in and out among logs and piles of drift.

“Some people’s as big fools as anybody!” I heard him mutter. “The idee o’ puttin’ a road in such a place as this! Makes a hoss pull an’ strain like a fly stuck in a dish o’ molasses.”

We ascended the succeeding stony grade, and I caught sight of the blackened smokestack of Colby’s furnace.

“See the furnace, Bill?” I cried. I was getting lonesome, and desired to talk.

“Yep,” Bill answered, nodding.

“Going to stop and get the salt as you go up?”

“Nope. Gee, Charley! Gee, Dan!”

“As you come back?”

“Yep. Haw, Charley!”

"Going to get a whole bar'l?"

"Yep."

"More than a bar'l?"

"Nope."

Bill could be as reticent at times as he was loquacious at others. But I was neither satisfied nor discouraged. So I tried another tack.

"Bill, how old are you—as old as Tildy Cramblett?" I asked in high-keyed, quavering tones.

I had learned that the mention of Tildy's name usually set Bill's tongue a-going. But this time it failed; he made no reply.

"Are you older'n Tildy, Bill?"—in shriller tones. Still no answer.

"Bill Kirk, how old *are* you?"—a frantic scream.

"Old enough to know the satisfaction o' grumblin' 'bout the rheumatiz," he grunted testily; "an' too old to open my mouth w'en I don't want to, you chatterin' blackbird. Now, shut up!"

For the time I gave over trying to engage him in conversation; and, throwing myself prone upon my stomach, I sought amusement in holding a stick against the spokes of a wheel, and in wondering how many revolutions a certain lump of moist clay would make ere it finally fell to the ground.

We passed Colby's furnace—standing black, grim and somber in the garish daylight, and silent, save for the wheezy, labored puff of the engine and the complaining squeak of the great wooden pump-beam—and proceeded on our way up the river. The water showed dark-green and glassy, not a ripple marring its mirror-like surface. The

level sandy road followed the windings of the stream, here passing under canopies of boughs and overhanging grapevines, and there zigzagging among the gigantic trunks of naked, ghostly sycamores. On, on we went, Bill as silent as the inanimate objects along the way, and I drowsy and half asleep. Four miles we covered in this way. Then we turned a sharp bend in the highroad, and, all at once, the great gray mill and tumbling dam were before us.

Bill cracked his whip and began to whistle. The muffled roar of the foaming water came to our ears. I sat up, yawned, and dug my fists into my smarting eyes. Then I craned my neck, and peeked and gazed—and gazed and peeked again.

Eagle mill! To me it was the wonder-house of the universe—a museum of incomparable sights and sounds. Many times I had been there; many times I went there in after years, and each succeeding visit but served to whet my boyish appetite for more. What the monster circus of to-day is to the average small boy, that old gray mill—with its cobwebbed, floury windows, its dusty nooks and crannies, its whirling wheels and whirring burrs, its sepulchral rumblings and jarrings—was to me.

It was an immense frame building—immense, at least, to a backwoods lad of twelve years, who had never been beyond the confines of his native county, and whose ideas of the great world beyond his ken were vague and contorted—two stories high, with sagging roof and creaking doors and shutters. It stood just below the aproned dam, one-half of it recklessly overhanging the turbulent billows, the

other half tenaciously clinging to solid earth. Separating the two halves or wings was an arched driveway overtopped by a single story; and through this gloomy tunnel—where the cold wind whistled in winter and the fragrant breeze loitered in summer—ran the public highway.

I can shut my eyes and see it all to-day, though not a timber of it now remains.

"Hello!" shouted Bill, as we pulled up in front of the wide door.

A swirl of air sweeping through the driveway raised a cloud of dust and chaff; the grumble and growl of heavy machinery muffled Bill's cry to a hoarse bellow. No one answered his hail. A number of farmers were sitting upon a rude bench running along the wall—where the sunlight plashed through a break in the weather-boarding, lazily whittling and chatting. One of them slowly arose, and, deliberately closing his knife and returning it to his pocket, volunteered to call the miller.

Peter Fogle waddled forth, bare arms akimbo, rotund and smiling. His fat rosy cheeks and double chin were innocent of beard; his pale blue eyes had a habitual expression of childlike, wondering inquiry. His small cloth cap perched insecurely upon the back of his head, loose jumper and baggy breeks, and his heavy-soled shoes—all liberally dusted with flour—gave him a comical appearance.

"Hullo, Beel!" he cried wheezingly. "How vas you to-day?"

Bill dignifiedly dismounted, climbed into the wagon, upended a sack and poised it upon the

edge of the wagonbed. Then—and not till then—he made answer:

“How was I to-day, you ol’ Dutch gander? Right smart tolerable, I thank you; not quite so well’s I have been, but consider’ble better ’n I was.”

Peter laughed good-naturedly, his protuberant abdomen shaking like a mold of jelly.

“Got a load of sometings, Beel?” he asked.

“Course I’ve got a load o’ somethin’,” Bill answered. “Think I brung the wagon ’long fer fun, an’ come here to get my hosses shod? Purty throng?”

“Yah,” the jolly miller wheezed, “pooty throng, Beel—a dozen mens aheat o’ you, alreaty.”

“How soon can I have my grindin’?” was Bill’s next inquiry.

“Tree ’r four ’clock.”

“Got to wait till then? Holy Jeehossyphat! It’ll be purty nigh dark by then. Waitin’ fer a grist’s like waitin’ fer a heavenly reward—feller’s likely to be dead ’fore he gits it. Well, let me off soon’s you can. Here, you pussy Dutchman, take this sack! Goin’ to let me stand here holdin’ it all day? You move slower ’n the last hour ’fore dinner.”

Peter, chuckling and wheezing, called his assistant. One by one they carried the heavy bags of grain into the mill and piled them upon the floor. I slid out over the tailboard and made for the door.

“Where are you goin’, Tom?” Bill demanded.

“Into the mill,” I answered, fetching a shiver.

“Cold?”

"Chilly."

"Froze stiffer 'n a ramrod, I 'spect," he remarked sarcastically, winking at the men upon the bench. "Don't try to bend him, 'r you'll break him. Well, go on in to the fire, Tom; I'll put the hosses in the shed. But don't you go to foolin' 'round them water-wheels n'r machin'ry."

"I won't," I promised, as I passed from his sight.

First, I sauntered into the office, a small box with one window—partitioned off in an extreme corner of the main room—and went through the farce of warming myself at the upright stove in which was a fire of blazing cobs. Seating myself upon a high stool, I dangled my legs and studied the numerous charcoal sketches upon the rough walls—pictures of fabulous animals and grotesque human beings—done with the burnt end of a pine stick.

But I was alone, and the wonders of the crazy old mill were calling me. My position grew monotonous, irksome, unbearable—all in a few minutes. I squirmed and twisted upon my seat; called to mind my promise to Bill, and remained quiet for ten seconds. Then, all at once, the tinkle of a small bell came to my ears—a wooing, siren voice that was irresistible. It whispered to me that a hopper was empty and that Peter Fogle would be refilling it. Worthy resolve went to the winds. I slid from my perch and scooted through the door.

I tagged the shuffling shoes of pursy Peter here and there; stood on tiptoe and peered into the depths of the pyramidal hoppers as he replenished them with wheat or corn; and interestedly observed him

as he thrust a pudgy hand into the chute, brought forth a handful of flour, and thoughtfully rubbed it between thumb and fingers. I stood by as he weighed bag after bag of golden grain upon the big swinging steelyards; watched him empty that same grain into the yawning mouth of the elevator, and saw it carried upward—away, away, I knew not whither—by an endless chain of iron buckets.

Growing weary of all this at last, I descended the rickety stairs to the quivering, throbbing platform just over the turbines. Kneeling and peering gingerly over the edge, I saw the wheels circling madly, dizzily, and felt rather than heard the thundrous, deafening roar and hiss and splash of pent and angry waters. What a titanic uproar it was! Foam-flecked, the tide from race and forebay wrestled with the giant turbines, lost itself among the darksome shadows, and emerged into the light of day, sullen and subdued. I gazed and gazed, until my sight wavered and my brain reeled. Then I sank back upon the stairs, closed my eyes, and pressed an index finger to each throbbing ear. Faint and far away was the tumult of sound. Of a sudden I opened my eyes and removed my fingers from my ears. Flash! Crack! Boom! It was all back—and in tenfold intensity. I repeated the experiment; and clapped my hands and laughed joyously.

Praise God for the faculty of recollection—for the sweet and precious remembrances of boyhood! I am living those days over again as I write.

A hand was laid upon my coat collar. I fetched

a startled squirm and peered over my shoulder. There stood Bill, his one eye twinkling humorously from the depths of tousled hair and bushy beard. He dragged me to my feet, saying with mock severity:

"Of all the venturesome youngsters, you're the alphas and omegas, Tom Gaston. I've been huntin' you fer half an hour an' worryin' myself into nine kinds o' conniption fits. I'd 'bout come to the c'nclusion you was in the bottom o' the river, 'r ground up into sausage-meat in some o' the machin'ry. You *do* keep a promise, don't you? Keep it like you'd keep a lump o' sugar—let it melt in y'r mouth an' fergit all 'bout it. I don't blame you a great sight, though,"—smiling and shaking his head.—"All boys is alike, I guess—they must be 'r they ain't boys. An' I was a boy once, myself, though maybe you wouldn't think it to look at me now. But I was one o' the purtiest babies that ever squawled with the colic. An' gee-ment-lee, *didn't* I have the colic! Used to raise the whole neighborhood with my hulla-baloo; I can remember all about it. But I was a monstrous purty youngster. Folks all called me 'Sweet William'; but finally they shortened it to plain 'Bill.' I ain't quite so purty now; still, I'm like a singed cat—a good 'eal better 'n I look. Come along up to the office, now. It'll soon be time fer us to eat our snack."

I offered no excuse for my misconduct; I saw that it was not necessary. And I did not feel my disgrace keenly; Bill's words and manner had served as a salve to my pricked conscience.

An hour we spent in the hot, stuffy office, Bill chatting with the waiting farmers, I amusing myself with a pile of cobs in the corner. The wind had risen. It whimpered and wailed around the moss-grown gables, clamored and rattled at sash and shutter; and then, in a frenzy, threw itself upon the unoffending river and mercilessly whipped it into foam.

After we had eaten our cold dinner Bill went forth to feed and water the horses. He returned shivering; and, drawing a stool near to the stove, remarked complainingly:

"It's gittin' colder, an' the air feels damp. We're goin' to have a spell o' weather; an' it'll spell rain 'r snow 'fore dark, in my 'pinion. Confound it! We never git a whole bolt o' weather here—nothin' but odds an' ends left over from other places. I wish my grist was done; I'd like to be on the road home."

I went on with my play; the men continued to talk and smoke. At last I heard one of them say:

"Yes, Fogle's purty liber'l in takin' toll—liber'l to hisself, that is; a feller's lucky if he gits his sack back."

The speaker hawhawed at his own witticism; his hearers joined him, and I paused in my play to listen.

"Fogle's takin' toll is like the way Shep Dickson bought the watermelon o' Jim Hess," said a stooped old man, knocking the ashes from his pipe and returning it to the pocket of his linsey shirt.

His auditors in one voice called for the story;

and in cracked nasal tones—and with assumed reluctance—he began:

“I guess it ain’t necessary fer me to tell any o’ you fellers who Shep Dickson is; ev’rybody knows *him*, an’——”

“An’ a good many knows him to the’r sorrer,” a raw-boned young fellow interjected.

Then all laughed uproariously; I could not understand why. The stooped old man went on:

“Yes, a good many’s been took in by Shep’s slick tongue an’ slicker ways, that’s a fact. But ther’s alluz somethin’ good you can say of a man, if you’ll only hunt it up. Shep’s sharper ’n a scratch-awl an’ as cheerful as a cricket, anyhow. But the story ’bout him buyin’ the melon o’ Jim Hess was like this: Shep and Jim was at a sale on the ol’ Kirkbride place out near Grantville. S’pect none o’ you fellers know Jim. He’s a little stiff-kneed runt, an’ lives on a bottom farm ’way down below, Mal-conta.

“Well, as I said, Shep bought a melon o’ Jim at the sale. It was the time Sile Johnson, who lived on the Kirkbride place, sold off his things an’ went West. Hess brought a wagonload o’ melons out to the sale, to sell to the folks that was there.

“He didn’t sell many till ’long ’bout noon. Then, people bein’ hungry an’ knowin’ there wasn’t no chance to git any dinner, made a raid on them melons; and’ Jim handed ’em out like hot cakes—faster ’n he could make change.

“When the rush was ’most over, Jim diskivered

Shep standin' by the wagon, with a big fat melon tucked under his arm.

"Want that melon, mister?" says Jim.

"He didn't know Shep from a side o' sole-leather.

"Want it?" answers Shep, pr'tendin' to be hurt in his feelin's. 'I *guess* I want it; an' I *reckon* I've a right to it, seein' I've paid fer it. Ain't you never goin' to give me back my change? Been standin' here waitin' fer ten minutes.'

"What—what—how much did you give me?" asks Jim, kind o' doubtful-like.

"What did I *give* you?" answers Shep as innocent as you please. 'Give you a dollar—a smooth silver dollar with a hammer dent on the edge of it.'

"Jim fished out his money; an' there was the dollar, sure 'nough.

"Well,' he says, slow an' uncertain-like, 'the melon's thirty-five cents. Here's y'r change.'

"An' dash my buttons!" the stooped old man concluded, "Shep Dickson hadn't give the feller a cent. An' Hess never knowed he'd been skinned, till Shep an' his cronies had gobbled up the melon, an' come 'round an' bragged an' laughed 'bout it. Shep had seen another feller give Jim that kind of a silver dollar, an' knowed in a minute how to bamboozle the simple critter. Talk 'bout the innocence o' unborn babes! A feller as thick-witted as *that* ort to be skinned; he ort, I swan to goodness!"

The old fellow finished with an unctuous chuckle that caused him to swallow part of his quid of tobacco and set him to coughing. Again the laugh

went round, I wondering why, I remember, for I could detect neither wit nor wisdom in the flat anecdote; and I felt that in applauding the story these men were approving the sharp practices of Shep Dickson. And I was not so far from the truth.

All my life Ruth had been my tutor and monitor; and I had fixed notions, at least, of honor and fair-dealing. So now I said boldly—though I was frightened at my own temerity, and felt my heart throbbing wildly and my face burning:

“I don’t see what you all laugh at. It was a dishonest thing to do—to cheat a man out of money, in that way!”

They only laughed the more, of course; and I became so embarrassed I thought I must break down and cry. My lips were trembling, and unshed tears of mortification were in my eyes, when Bill came to my support with:

“You’re all right, youngster; but you’re a little too young to understand where the laugh comes in on some things. Maybe Shep’s trick wasn’t exactly the honestest; but it was awful funny, anyhow. Howsomever, I guess I’ll tell you a little story. I knowed a boy once that hooked a melon out of a patch; carried it—an’ it was all he could lug—a mile in a b’ilin’ sun; an’ w’en he got it home an’ socked his Barlow knife into it, he found it was a citron—an’ greener ’n grass. Ever hear that story before?”

He comically cocked his head, extruded his tongue, and winked his solitary eye. I slyly wiped my moist lips and nervously giggled aloud.

"Seems to see the p'int o' *that* yarn," the stooped old man cried gleefully, rubbing his husky palms; "an' he don't find no dishonesty in the transaction, neither, it 'pears. Look at him laughin'!"

"I'm laughing 'cause I was—was the *boy*," I explained.

Their merriment knew no bounds. And the absurdity of my position appealing to my sense of humor, I joined them. Nevertheless, I had the boyish notion that it was one thing for a boy to hook a melon from a neighbor's patch—and rather commendable than otherwise—and quite another thing for a man to cheat a fellow out of money. And—I blush not to say it!—my shriveled old soul is roomy enough to hold that boyish notion still.

It was three o'clock. The sky was overcast and a cold rain was falling. The miller's assistant came and announced that our grist was ready. I followed Bill to the outer door, as he went for the team and wagon; but there I paused, and, at his suggestion, returned to the fire.

The office was in semi-darkness. Only two of the assembled company remained. They were seated ~~near~~ the window, their heads close together, and were talking in low, confidential tones. I silently mounted a stool—the stove between them and me—and moodily awaited the arrival of Bill and the wagon. I was weary, and anxious to start upon the homeward trip.

Presently I heard one of the men say in a sibilant whisper: "Yes, Shep Dickson's gittin' bolder an' bolder. He's stealin' hosses right an' left, out 'bout

the Perry county line an' beyond—there ain't no doubt 'bout it. Of course he's been at it fer years, stealin' in other neighborhoods on the sly an' hidin' the hosses in these hills an' hollers, till the hue an' cry was over, an' then runnin' them off to Virginy 'r Kaintucky an' sellin' 'em. Ev'rybody's knowed all the time what was goin' on, but has been 'feared to say anything. Shep an' his gang is desper't' characters, an' nobody wants to git the'r ill-will—you know that."

"I know," assented the other man; "an' I know, too, there's more 'n one in this neighborhood that's concerned in the business with him—not in the stealin', p'rhaps, but in the hidin'. Ol' Sam Colby's boy, Marsh, the one that runs the furnace, can't show re'l clean hands, I guess. Folks say—an' them that ort to know—that he's helped to ferry more'n one load o' good hosses 'cross the river, on dark nights, an' helped to hide 'em in Newburn's big woods, in some o' the hollers an' caves; an'——"

"An' how 'bout ol' John Gaston?" the first speaker broke in.

I started, and almost tumbled headlong from my seat. What horrible revelation was I about to hear? With an effort I caught myself, clung with both hands to the side of my seat, and listened breathlessly.

The man, all unconscious of my presence, went on: "I've alluz knowed he was mean enough to steal corn from a blind sow, but I never heerd till lately that he was s'picioned o' bein' mixed up in Shep's hoss-dealin's. There'll be an explosion one o' these

days; an' somebody'll git burnt so bad they'll smell o' scorched hair all the rest o' the'r days."

The other man grunted an assent. Then they conversed in lower, more guarded tones, frequently glancing toward the door. I could hear little of what they said, but these words burned themselves into my memory:

" . . . boy seems bright. . . looks some like ol' John, but ~~is~~ like his mother. . . say his meanness broke his wife's heart an' killed 'er. Folks say Ruth ain't his daughter . . . brother's child, some say . . . farm an' ev'rything hers. . . tryin' to marry her off to Marsh Colby . . . divide the money. Ruth ain't like neither ol' John n'r . . ."

The men, attracted by something outside, broke off suddenly and passed from the room without seeing me. I had been an unwilling eavesdropper. At any time while they were talking I would gladly have made my escape; but I feared they might detect me. Now I was in a state bordering on nervous terror. I shivered—my teeth chattered, and a sob rose in my throat. I did not grasp the meaning of all I had heard; but I comprehended enough to realize that the charges were very discreditable to my father. And, while I did not love or respect him, I looked upon myself as having a part in his affairs; and, with boyish egotism, felt that my honesty had been impugned, that my character had been assailed, that I was in public disgrace and disfavor.

I was deeply hurt. I slipped from the office and stole to the outer door. The driveway was dusky,

and deserted. Bill had not yet come. I listened to the souging wind, the dashing rain—and burst into tears. I was a sturdy-minded, self-reliant lad, in the main, though small for my age, yet I leaned against the wall and wept. Never had I felt so depressed and lonely in my life. Oh, how I longed for Ruth—for her plump, warm arms around me, for her whispered words of love and consolation in my ear!

Bill drove up; and soon the load was on the wagon.

“Jump in, Tom,” he said briskly, shaking the wet from his slouch hat, “an’ cuddle down under them quilts. It’s rainin’ pitchforks—forked ends down. We must hurry an’ git started; it’s goin’ to be darker ’n a nigger prayer-meetin’ ’fore we git home.”

Then, noting my tearful condition:

“W’y, what’s the matter, youngster? Y’r eyes is leakin’ like a meal-sieve. What’s the matter—git skeered ’bout somethin’?”

I did not answer, but continued to mop my face and sob.

“Think I wasn’t comin’ an’ that you’d have to stay here all night?”

Still I made no reply. I was ashamed of my weakness—ashamed that he had caught me weeping.

“Come—out with it!” he said curtly but not unkindly, taking me by the arm.

I caught his hand in both my own, looked into his homely, honest face, and between sobs began to tell

him what I had heard. He listened patiently for a moment. But suddenly he snatched away his hand, lifted me from the ground into the wagon, playfully forced me down upon the straw in the front of the bed, and pulled the quilts and comforters over me. Then, lifting one corner of my covers and peeping in at me, he chuckled:

“There you are—snug’s a pea in a pod. No more blubberin’, now, an’ don’t never pay no ’tention to what you hear a lot of ol’ grannies say. The’r *sayin’* a thing’s so don’t *make* it so; an’ so long’s they’re gabbin’ ’bout y’r pap, they’re lettin’ some other poor devil alone. Now, we’re goin’ to start. Keep under the comforts an’ don’t git wet. Course you ain’t neither sugar n’r salt—an’ you won’t melt; but you’re somebody’s *honey*.”

He gave me a gentle pat or two and turned away, whistling. How grateful I felt toward the rough, uncouth fellow! And, moved by the feeling, I buried my face in the clean, sweet straw, and wept afresh.

As he climbed into the saddle, he cut short his whistle and muttered:

“The thunder’s beginnin’ to roll an’ mutter; an’ that alluz means a storm. Well, w’en it comes some people can look out fer the’rselves; but I’ll look out fer the gal an’ the youngster.”

I thought he referred to the warring elements, though I could not reconcile the patent incongruities of his remarks; and I was not disturbed.

Out of the driveway we rolled. I was conscious of the motion of the vehicle, the gathering darkness,

and the pelting rain. Farther and farther receded the sounds of the creaking wagon, jangling chains and splashing hoofs. As in a dream I heard Bill humming:

“They grewed unto the tall church-top
An’ could not grow any higher;
They tangled an’ tied in a true-lover’s knot—
The red-rose an’ the brier.”

Then was all the blackness of oblivion. I was asleep.

CHAPTER II

"MARSH! Oh, Marsh! Marsh Colby!"

I stirred uneasily, and threw off my coverings. Something soft and feathery and cool fell upon my upturned face. The rain had turned to snow, which was melting as it fell. Half awake and wholly confused, I raised myself upon my elbow.

"Oh, Marsh!" I heard Bill call again.

Then I knew we were at Colby's furnace. One of the horses pawed uneasily, and Bill spoke soothingly to it. The booming thunder of Limestone creek filled the damp air—almost silencing the drone of the engine and the eerie scream of the pump-beam.

The rain and melting snow had soaked quilts and comforters. I shivered, yawned, and sat erect. Dense dusk walled us in. The furnace loomed up as a blacker mass in the general blackness. Far in the depths of the low-lying sheds, where the white salt was heaped like snowdrifts, and where long rows of crusted caldrons boiled and bubbled, twinkled a solitary light.

"Oh, Marsh!" Bill bellowed, ending with a grumbling objurgation.

A door of the building suddenly flew open, and a fan of fiery light radiated into the darkness, illuminating a space of river and shore, and revealing a burly figure striding toward us.

It was Marsh Colby. At the edge of the area of light he stopped, peered intently into the gloom, and in a cautious undertone queried:

"Hullo! Who's there?"

"Nobody but me an' Tom an' the team," cackled Bill. "Think it was Cinderrellar and her coach-an'-four?"

"It's you, is it, Bill?" Marsh inquired in a tone of mingled relief and disappointment.

"No, it's my ghost," Bill replied facetiously. "Don't stand there winkin' like a toad battin' at thunder. I want to git a bar'l o' salt."

"Well, wheel 'em around an' back 'em up here to the door," Marsh grunted ungraciously. "Don't think I'm goin' to carry it out to you, do you?"

He retired to the full light, and stood stripping the grimy moisture from his sinewy bare arm with thumb and finger, while Bill was backing the wagon into position.

Then he said curtly:

"Where'll you have it?"

"Hind end," snarled Bill. "Wait till I move a sack 'r two."

"Needn't snap a feller's head off," the younger man grumbled, leaning a pair of skids against the wagon-bed.

"You're doin' a heap o' grumblin' y'rself," the other countered; "but y'r bark's worse 'n y'r bite, I guess."

Marsh sullenly refused to make reply. Silently they rolled a barrel from one of the open sheds and placed it in the wagon. Then Bill jerked out:

"Who'd you think I was?"

"When?" was the gruff answer.

"When I hollered to you."

"Didn't know."

"*Course* you didn't *know*. But what did you *think*?"

"I didn't think."

"Ain't in the habit o' thinkin', ain't you?"

"No."

"I guess you had an idee I was somebody else."

"Who?"

"Oh, somebody," Bill said tantalizingly; "Shep Dickson, fer instance."

"Say, Bill Kirk!"—blusteringly—"What do you mean?"

"Nothin'—nothin' at all," with assumed guilelessness and mild alarm.

"I wouldn't be a cussed fool!" Mark snorted angrily.

"Most anybody wouldn't, if they could help it," Bill returned placidly. "But some people *can't* help it."

"Do you mean that fer me?" Marsh demanded hoarsely.

"If the shoe fits you, put it on an' wear it,"—with a taunting laugh.

Then, in a voice of fierce intensity that I could hardly recognize as his, Bill continued: "Marsh Colby, the shoe that fits the closest pinches the hardest! You needn't git on y'r high hoss an' rant around. I know a few things, *I* do. An' you can't scare me, either—even if you are the bully o' Lime-

stone creek. God never intended one man to be run over by another; an' if ever you jump onto me—as I've knowed you to jump onto *some* men—I'll let daylight through you, that's all!"

Marsh shook his long black hair from his eyes, lifted his chin, and laughed sneeringly:

"Listen at the little whiffet brag! W'y, Bill Kirk, I'm only twenty-eight years old, an' stout as an ox. I whipped better men 'n you 'fore I was sixteen. I could take you by the nape o' y'r neck, shake you out o' y'r skin, an' eat you raw—without salt 'r pepper. An' as fer y'r threats, I don't keer *that* fer 'em,"—contemptuously snapping his fingers.—"The idee o' *you* bristlin' up to *me*—you little fiste!"

As he finished Marsh drew himself proudly erect, smote his naked hairy chest with his big hand, and emitted a derisive grunt.

He was a magnificent specimen of physical manhood—a giant in size, a daredevil in disposition, a two-fisted bully, young, muscular and active. When under the influence of liquor he was inclined to be insulting and quarrelsome; and for years he had been a terror to the timid of the primitive community.

However, Bill Kirk, the diminutive, did not appear to hold the redoubtable ogre in dread; for now he answered undauntedly:

"Who's doin' the braggin' *now*, Marsh Colby? S'pect you *could* eat me, if I'd jest lay down an' let you. But you take a fool's advice—an' don't never try it. 'Twon't be a re'l healthy job, I give you warnin'."

"'Taint no use a-wastin' words," Marsh growled disgustedly. "You an' me hain't got no cause to quar'l, anyhow. If you know a few things—as you say you do—jest keep a still tongue in y'r head. You'll live longer an' be happier, Bill."

Then, turning and facing the open door, he holloed to his helpers: "Ike, you an' Jim punch up the fire under the last row of kittles."

I was not alarmed at the wordy encounter of the two men. In those days, in such primitive communities, quarreling and fighting were not at all uncommon. Besides, I knew that Marsh Colby—brutal and unprincipled as he was—would not dare to attack so small a man as Bill Kirk. His own cronies would have pointed the finger of scorn at him had he done so.

"Awake, Tom?" Bill asked, walking up to the wagon.

I gave an affirmative reply.

"Well, I guess we might as well be joggin'. The creek's on a rampage; an' we'll 'ave a time of it, goin' through the backwater this side o' home. Hal-luluyer, but I'm hungry! Couldn't let us have a lantern, could you?"

This inquiry was directed to Colby, who stood scowling, his brawny arms folded upon his breast.

"No," the furnace-man answered surlily. "I ain't got but two, an' I need 'em both. An', Bill, you said somethin' 'bout me bein' the bully o' Limestone creek. I *am*—an' I'm proud of it. An' you can tell ev'rybody you meet that I say I'm the best man that ever cracked his fists 'r heels in this

valley; an' that I'm ready to back it up ag'in all comers, an'——"

"Maybe you want to back it up ag'in the feller that's comin' now," Bill interrupted grumpily, as he climbed into the saddle. "I don't know who he is; but I hear him crossin' the bridge."

The clatter of shod hoofs upon the wet planks of the bridge spanning the mouth of the creek was followed quickly by the appearance of a horse and rider.

Reining in his steed, a few yards from us, the newcomer said in a low, pleasing voice—drawling his words with seeming affectation and slightly slurring his final r's:

"Good-evening. Will one of you gentlemen be kind enough to tell me which of these roads leads to the Coon tavern?"

"There' ain't nobody o' that name here," Marsh replied sulkily.

"I don't understand you," the stranger returned in a tone of perplexity.

"You don't!" was the insolent rejoinder. "I s'pect it ain't the only thing you don't understand, either. I said there wasn't no gentlemen here. We're jest men—an' mighty *good* men, too."

It was plain that the bully of Limestone creek had been drinking and was in a quarrelsome and dangerous mood. I listened breathlessly for the stranger's reply.

"Oh, that's it," he laughed musically. "Well, we won't quarrel about that. Every man surely ought to know his own standing. Anyhow, will

you tell me which road will take me to the Coon tavern?"

"Won't neither one of 'em take you," Colby growled, with an oath; "your hoss'll 'ave to do that—if he's able. Now, ride on—an' don't ask no more fool questions."

The stranger lifted his hat and coolly shook the wet from it. I felt that he was smiling, though I could not distinguish his features, and could barely outline his form in the darkness.

Presently he said in quiet, measured tones:

"My friend, I asked you a civil question, expecting a civil answer. Your words and manner have shown me that you are right in your estimation of yourself—that you're *not* a gentleman."

Big Marsh Colby took a step forward. His bony hands were clenched; his eyes were blazing.

"Ride on; git away from here!" he thundered. "If you don't, I'll drag you from y'r hoss an' hammer the life out o' you!"

The burly fellow was desperately in earnest; I saw that. His liquor had got the better of his judgment; he was thoroughly irresponsible—a raging animal thirsting for a bloody encounter.

Bill Kirk did not appear at all concerned, however. He calmly sat his horse and softly whistled to himself.

I was fascinated with the prospect of a fight; yet I shuddered at the probable result. For, to me, Marsh Colby was invincible. All my life I had heard of his great size, his vast strength, his mighty prowess—how he was six-feet-four in height and

tipped the beam at two hundred and fifty pounds, how he was all bone and sinew, how, unaided, he could life a barrel of salt into a wagon, and how he had knocked a bull down with a single blow of his fist. What chance had any ordinary man in the hands of such a giant? So I crouched down in the bottom of the wagon-bed, trembling for the safety of the stranger with whose soft, musical voice I was already in love. But I could not remove my eyes from the scene enacting before me.

Then, of a sudden, moved by a strange impulse, I sprang erect and cried shrilly—frantically:

“Go—go quick, mister! He’ll whip you—kill you! The road up the creek leads to the Coon tavern. Do go—quick!”

Bill turned in the saddle and said sharply:

“Shut up, Tom! You ain’t a mourner at this funer’l. If they want to fight, w’y let ’em fight. An’ bully fer the best man!”

I limply subsided into my nest upon the straw; but I kept my eyes fixed upon the stalwart form of Marsh Colby and the dusky outlines of the stranger. I heard the latter saying:

“This is the public highway, my friend, and I’ve a right on any part of it. I didn’t come here at your invitation: and I won’t leave at your bidding.”

His voice showed neither fear nor excitement; it was as low and well-modulated as at the beginning.

“You won’t go, won’t you?” Marsh roared, cracking his maul-like fists together and striding toward the audacious horseman. “That’s jest what

I've been wantin' you to say, cuss you! *Now*, I'm goin' to do what I said I'd do—drag you from that hoss an' break ev'ry bone in y'r body!"

And he made a move to put his threat into execution.

"Wait a moment," the stranger said quietly. "I won't put you to the trouble of pulling me from my horse. You seem to be spoiling for a fight; and, wet and weary as I am, I mean to accommodate you."

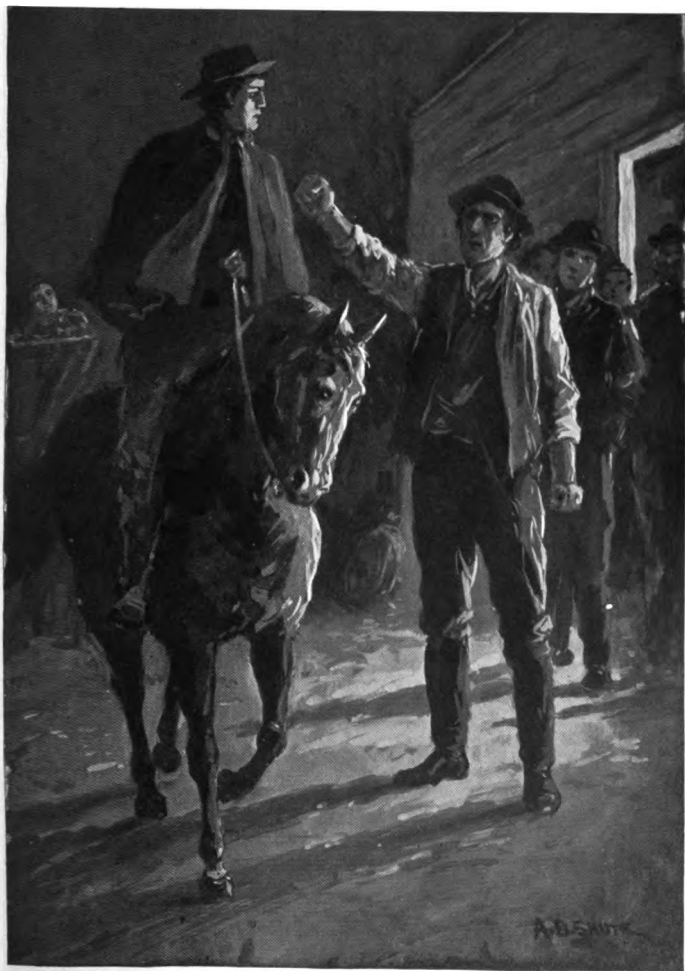
With the words, he spurred his animal into the fan of light issuing from the open door of the furnace and lightly sprang to the ground. Then, having quickly unclasped the long cloth cape that enveloped his shoulders, he flung it over the saddle, tilted back his wet slouch hat, and stood silently smiling, awaiting Colby's assault.

"I'm alluz 'feared of a dog that grins an' shows his teeth," I heard Bill say to himself in an undertone.

At the time I knew not what he meant, and I thought his remark irrelevant to the occasion. But ripe experience has taught me to beware of the antagonist who goes smiling to battle.

There was just time to note that the rash stranger was tall, straight and rather slender—compared with Marsh's massy bulk, at any rate—when the latter, with a hoarse snort of mad rage, rushed upon his antagonist.

A wave of sickening dread surged over me; and I closed my eyes to shut out what I feared must inevitably follow. I had no squeamish notions of the right and wrong of the affair. I was not timorous;



**“I’m goin’ to drag you from that hoss an’ break ev’ry bone
in yer body.”**

I was not over refined. Indeed, heredity and environment had made me a young savage more or less. Ruth's influence and training alone had saved me from being a detestable little ruffian. I had witnessed more than one fight in which strong men struggled for the mastery, and my cheek had not paled. But this was different. This youthful, agile stranger, in whose fortunes—with boyish abandon—I was already so interested, was no match for Marsh Colby. There was the rub. The poor fellow would be bruised, maimed—murdered, perhaps! Oh! why didn't Bill interfere? Why didn't he do something?

I would not—I could not look upon the sickening spectacle; but my ears were alert to every sound. I heard the shuffle of feet, the hiss of pent breath, muttered maledictions—a low, tantalizing laugh, a ripping oath.

“Shanghai an' gamecock!” Bill cackled gleefully. “Mighty purty fight! Never *did* see such duckin' an' dodgin'!”

Still I could not open my eyes. I was self-hypnotized. But my two ears were depicting the scene. Through them I seemed to see everything—the red light streaming out into the night, the wall of blackness surrounding, the grim building, the restless teams and the stranger's statuesque steed, the swiftly shifting figures of the combatants, the quick blows and skillful parries, heaving chests and tense muscles—all, everything.

Soon came the smack of a hard blow—followed by a heavy thud. I cowered lower in the straw, and ceased to breathe, almost. I was faint, nauseated.

Had Marsh killed the stranger? Bill Kirk's voice broke the oppressive silence.

"As clean a lick an' as purty a knockdown as I ever seen!" he cried in genuine admiration. "Didn't think the gamecock had it in him. Look out, stranger!"—excitedly. "He's comin' at you ag'in!"

Instantly the spell that held me was broken. My eyes flew open; I got upon my knees and craned forward, the better to see what was going on.

Marsh was again upon his feet. Blood was dripping from his prominent nose; one drooping eyelid hid the ball beneath. He looked sullen, savage, awful. Partially sobered by the blow that had felled him, he was fighting a little more warily—but still on the offensive.

The stranger was untouched. Round and round the lighted area they circled, Marsh rushing and striking rapidly and wildly, and attempting to clinch his wary, nimble antagonist—the latter easily eluding the giant's grasp and adroitly parrying his sledge-like blows. Such a fight I had never seen, and, boy though I was, I realized that I was witnessing a contest between manly science and brute strength and endurance.

Marsh's frequent blind rushes, his rain of blows, his frantic attempts to clinch, availed him nothing. He breathed heavily, with open mouth, his great chest heaving. His movements were becoming slower; his blows had less force. The stranger appeared but little distressed; he continued to smile confidently, and fought entirely on the defensive. Evi-

dently he meant to wind his bulky antagonist before attempting to deliver a knockout blow. Realizing this, apparently, Marsh set in to end the thing at once—while yet his vast strength was available.

With a final explosion of breath and energy, he forced the stranger to the border of the fan of light—and out into the darkness beyond. There I could barely distinguish their forms; and could note nothing of their movements.

It was all over soon, however. I cannot say how it was done. All I know is that the giant reeled back into the light—his hands held aloft—spun half around upon his heels, and fell like a log to the ground.

Bill slowly dismounted, and, bending over the senseless man, murmured in an awe-struck whisper:

“Knocked half way from here to kingdom-come, at one lick! Don’t see how he done it. Jest as soon have a mule kick me!”

The stranger was panting and perspiring, but without a word he coolly put on his cloak and got into the saddle.

Then, turning and pointing to Marsh, he said to Bill:

“You needn’t worry; he’ll be all right in a few minutes. I just gave him a little tap on the jaw.” Then to me: “Now, my boy, did you say the road up the creek is the way to the Coon tavern?”

“Y-e-s, sir,” I stammered, flustered at his sudden address.

“Then I’ll be going. I trust you two will par-

don my thrashing your friend. I simply had to; I——”

“He ain’t no friend o’ mine n’r Tom’s,” Bill broke in hurriedly, “but he’s got friends in the furnace; an’ they may raise a rumpus with you, if they find out what’s happened. There—he’s comin’ to! You ride on up the creek road a little ways, stranger, an’ wait fer us. We’re goin’ up that way, an’ we’ll pilot you. ’Twon’t be safe fer you to try to go through the creek bottoms alone; they’re all overflowed. He’s comin’ to—fast. Ride on up the road an’ wait fer us.”

“No,” the young man said resolutely, “I won’t run away. When you’re ready to start I’ll go with you.”

At that moment Marsh heaved a deep respiration, opened his quivering eyelids, and struggled to a sitting posture. He put his hand to his head and stared confusedly around. Bill took him by the arm and assisted him to arise. The big fellow swayed this way and that, clumsily shifting his leaden feet and reaching out for support.

“Steady on y’r pins, Marshy!” Bill laughed whimsically. “There’s been a most tremendous earthquake, an’ you got sort o’ seasick. Better lean ’g’inst the buildin’; the world’s still a-spinnin’ round like a whirligig—an’ you ain’t got no more back-bone ’n a fishin’-worm. Steady, now! Watch out—’r down you’ll go like a crock o’ buckwheat batter! There! Now, I’ll go an’ call the boys.”

He suited his action to the words. The two helpers came forth, but stood stupefied until Bill explained:

"Marsh has been took sudden sick, fellers—somethin' like a spell o' the limber horizontals. Better help him inside an' let him lay down a while."

The two started to carry out Bill's suggestion. But Marsh had so far recovered that he waved them aside and, staggering toward the silent horseman, panted:

"I—know what—you done! You hit me—with a rock—'r somethin'! I've been knocked down before—once in my life; but I was never knocked senseless. An' no man can do it with his fist. You hit me—with a stone!"

"I hit you with my fist," the stranger quietly replied.

"Then, you—you used brass knuckles on me, cuss you!"

"I used my bare fist."

"You're a liar!"

The stranger made a hasty move to dismount; but he checked himself and, after a momentary struggle, settled back in the saddle and said icily:

"I have to take that—now. You're hardly responsible for what you say; and you're in no condition to back it up. Down in Kentucky, where I come from, when a man calls another a liar, he courts death. I may never meet you again; but if I do, and you——"

He abruptly stopped speaking and fixed a look of wonder upon Marsh. The latter, mouth agape—and wholly oblivious of the voice in his ear, stood staring at the Kentuckian's steed.

"Where'd you git—that horse?" he asked gaspingly.

Too amazed to resent the question, the stranger answered:

"In Kentucky."

"What's his name?" Marsh inquired huskily.

"Kaintuck."

Colby's jaw dropped lower; his blood-stained features underwent a spasm. He reeled backward a step; then wheeled and lurched drunkenly through the door, into the furnace. His two helpers quickly followed him.

"Well, I'll be dod-burned!" was Bill's mumbled exclamation.

"What ailed him?" the Kentuckian asked. "What made him act so?"

"Don't know," Bill grunted, with a decided shake of the head. "Guess the sight of a Kaintucky saddle hoss was too much fer his equil-brium—kind o' made him feel lonesome, someway. I couldn't see nothin' else to upset him. Acted like a reg'lar lunny—dogged if he didn't! Well, come on; le's be goin'. My stomach's cleavin' to my backbone; an' Tom there 'll be a livin' skeleton in less 'n fifteen minutes."

Soon we were again on our homeward way. The sky had partially cleared; the stars were peeping out. I burrowed under the straw and coverings, and drowsed and shivered. The sullen boom and roar of the swollen creek was a soothing lullaby.

Whenever I roused and peered from my burrow I dimly distinguished the young Kentuckian riding be-

hind the wagon, his horse impatiently champing the bit and stepping with the lightness and daintiness of a sprightly young woman.

We moved slowly. Bill occasionally turned in the saddle and fired a sentence over my head at the stranger.

"You're purty handy with y'r paws, mister," he remarked as we were descending to the flooded bottom. "Where'd you learn it?"

"At college," was the low-voiced reply.

"Did, eh? Wouldn't mind 'tendin' a few terms at that school myself. What's y'r name—if you don't mind tellin'?"

"Vance Chatham."

"An' you're from Kaintucky?"

"Yes."

Bill was silent for some seconds, evidently pondering. Then he said:

"Purty good piece o' hossflesh you straddle. Where'd you git him?"

"In Kentucky," the stranger answered apathetically.

"Saddle hoss, of course?"

"Yes."

"What's his age?"

"Six years."

"Know his pedigree?"

"Yes."

"What is he?"

"A Denmark."

"That so!" Bill exclaimed. "Best breed in the country. Raise him?"

"No, bought him."

"Must 'ave cost you a snug pile, eh?"

"I don't know what he cost," the young man replied, a shade of sadness in his tone. "My father bought him for me—just before he died."

"How far 'ave you come to-day?" was Bill's next question.

"From Marietta."

"The deuce you say! All of fifty miles—an' mighty bad roads. An' that hoss don't seem a mite tuckered. Purty good stuff in him, I reckon. Why didn't you stop over night in Malconta—good 'eal better place 'n the Coon tavern?"

"I wanted to get as far on my journey as possible,"—yawning wearily.

Again Bill remained silent for several seconds. But presently I heard him mumbling to himself:

"Looks like the same hoss—near's I can tell in the dark. Kaintuck—the same name; ches'nut sor'l, long white stockin' on hind foot—the left one. Ol' George Simpson's hoss, I'll bet my bottom dollar! Lost him two years ago, too. A Denmark; Marsh was skeered, too, an'——"

The rumbling of the vehicle drowned his voice, and I heard no more. But I had caught enough. My intuition was keen—whetted by what I had heard at the mill—and I knew what his disjointed soliloquy meant. I peeped out at the dusky shape of horse and rider following the wagon and drew back trembling. An ill-defined dread—dread of what the Kentuckian's presence might portend, of what might happen—took possession of me. My thoughts were

black and bitter. The memory of that night ride is indelibly stamped upon my brain. Alternately I hoped and despaired, and prayed that the stranger might pass on out of the community and never return. Everything became clear to me. I saw my father a common horse-thief—a member of Shep Dickson's gang of scoundrels—liable to arrest and punishment at any time!

How I shuddered and suffered! Ah, the fears and sorrows of childhood—like its joys and pleasures—are real things, not the shadowy nothings many would have us believe!

At the bottom of the grade Bill called to our companion:

“Here's the creek out over all creation—bigger 'n ol' Noey's flood, an' purty toler'ble deep, I thank you! Keep close to the wagon, mister. Maybe I can find the road—don't know.”

Into the flood he went. Deeper and deeper it grew as we proceeded. In the dim starlight the shifting waters looked black and dreadful. The explosive, booming roar of the main stream near at hand was deafening. Floating drift bumped jarringly against wagon and team, impeding our progress and causing the frightened animals to shy and blunder. Higher and higher rose the water, until the wheel-hubs were buried and Bill's legs were dangling in the inky flood. I deserted my nest and perched upon the load.

“Whoa!”

The wagon came to a sudden stop, and the stranger and his steed almost collided with it.

“What's the matter?” he shouted.

"Don't know whether I'm in the road 'r not," Bill bellowed in reply. "Can't see nothin'. I'm 'feared to go ahead, an' I can't turn 'round an' go back. Wish to thunder I was out on dry land! Don't think I was ever cut out fer a sailor."

Their voices sounded faint and far away.

"Can't I ride around you and find the road?" the Kentuckian asked.

"No!" Bill returned decidedly. "Don't you think o' tryin' it. The ground's lower on both sides o' the road; an' you'll git in over y'r depth, sure. 'F I could only see the big sycamore, I'd know where I was. The road runs jest to the left of it."

"Well, what're you going to do?"

"Don't know. Set here like a bump on a log, I reckon, till the water goes down."

"It may be rising."

"Jinks! I never thought of that. If it comes much higher, the flour an' meal 'll be already mixed fer bakin'."

"You can't turn around and go back?"

"Nope."

"And you fear to go on?"

"Yep."

"Do you think the sycamore tree you spoke of is straight ahead of you?"

"Yep."

The young Kentuckian said no more. But a moment later I heard a mighty splash at the side of the wagon, and saw him and his magnificent animal go past us.

"Come back here, you reckless devil!" Bill

bawled excitedly. "You'll drown'd y'rself an' y'r hoss, to boot! You can't find that tree, in the dark, a bit more 'n you could find a flea in a peck o' turnip-seed. Come back here, I say!"

The venturesome horseman, with an answering laugh, rode farther and farther into the enveloping gloom—into the engulfing flood. When he was some yards beyond us, and almost lost from sight in the darkness, we saw him slide from the saddle and place his right arm over the horse's withers. The gallant animal was swimming. Then both steed and rider disappeared—gone we knew not where!

"Drown'd!" Bill groaned nervelessly, dropping his arms to his 'sides, and squirming like one in torture.

"Don't say that, Bill!" I screamed, springing to my feet. "Can't we do something? Can't we—can't we?"

"Shut up, Tom—an' set down!" he snapped irritably. "*You'll* be flouncin' into the water, the next thing you know. An' the Lord knows I don't want *you* to git drown'd! What's the matter with you, anyhow—want to commit suicide, like that other fool? Set *down*, I say!"

"But the stranger—the Kentuckian, Bill—do you think he's drown'd?" I chattered, trembling with excitement.

"*Set down!*" he commanded sternly.

I reluctantly obeyed.

He went on: "Now, *stay down!* Maybe the fool-hardy ain't drown'd yit; but he will be, I'm 'feared. If him an' his hoss gits below the road, they'll be

washed out into the creek; an' then salt wouldn't save 'em. It's a dern shame, too! As good a hoss as ever champed a bit; an' as nice a young feller as ever drubbed a bully. An' what 're we goin' to do, I'd like to know? Guess I'll try to hitch the teams to the hind axle an' drag the wagon——”

“Hello!”

The hail came faintly to us from far out in the darkness.

“There he is—that's him!” I cried, joyfully clapping my hands.

“Hush!” cautioned Bill. “Maybe it's him, an' maybe it ain't. You jump at c'nclusions, Tom Gaston, like a rooster jumpin' at a grub-worm!”

Then he shaped his hands to his mouth, threw back his head, and fired a lusty “hullo!” across the water. An answer came promptly.

“'Tis him, by grab!” Bill chuckled gleefully. “He ain't drowned by a dern sight—an' I'm mighty glad of it!”

Again making a funnel of his palms, he called: “Hullo, Kaintuckian! Find the sycomore?”

“Yes. Do you locate me?”

“Yep.”

“You're too far down. You must bear to the right. Come on.”

How weird his voice sounded, coming out of the depths of the darkness and the swash of surging waters!

“Gee, Charley! Gee, Dan!”

We turned sharply to the right and moved forward. Wagon and horses sank lower. I drew my

knees up to my chin and held my breath. Were we to be swamped—drowned, after all? Oh, joy! The flood was growing more shallow; we were on firm footing—in the road. A few yards farther—and the big sycamore loomed up and seemed to brush past us. Then we were on solid ground, and the Kentuckian was saying:

“Here you are—all safe and sound! Did you get your grist wet?”

“No, guess not,” Bill answered. “But it was a mighty close shave—too close fer comfort. *You’re* wet, though—wetter ’n a drowned rat. I thought you was a goner fer sure w’en you slid from y’r hoss. Had a hard time of it, didn’t you—gittin’ out o’ that deep hole?”

“Not very,” the stranger replied, with a laugh that ended in a shiver. “Kaintuck has a good deal of mettle in him.”

“That wouldn’t make him float no better,” Bill said with a guffaw. “But I know what you mean. An’ I guess his master’s got a fair sprinklin’ of iron in *him*, too. Say! *You’re* wet an’ cold an’ hungry, an’ you can’t go no further to-night; you’ll ’ave to stop an’ stay over with us. I work fer John Gaston, ’bout a half mile ’bove here. That’s his boy, Tom, in the wagon. Le’s be movin’. Got to git you to the fire, an’ into dry duds, ’r you’ll ’ave the rheumatics an’ be stiffer ’n a sawhoss—an’ be swelled up like a buckeyed steer. Come on.”

In silence we moved along the muddy road. I was in a state of mental disquietude—of feverish unrest. What would happen, now that the stranger

was to stay over night with us? Would my father recognize Kaintuck, as had Marsh Colby and Bill Kirk? And if he should, what would he do? And Marsh! Would he follow after the Kentuckian, to seek revenge?

As though divining my thoughts, Bill remarked—just as we came in sight of the twinkling lights of home:

“It’s a good thing, mister—what did you say y’r name was?”

“Vance Chatham.”

“As I was goin’ to say,” Bill resumed, “it’s a good thing you ain’t goin’ to stay in this strip o’ timber. Some fellers can do more with the’r backs ’n they can with the’r brains. Marsh Colby—the one you had the fight with—is one o’ that kind. If you was to stay round here, he’d make things hot fer you, an’ don’t you fergit it. He hain’t got no more sense n’r principle ’n to want revenge. He’d foller a jaybird to hell, if it’ld steal an acorn from him. An’ you’ve done worse ’n that to him. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, I think the best thing you can do is to git away from this neighborhood in the mornin’ as fast as y’r hoss can carry you. An’ that’ll be purty toler’able fast, I’m guessin’.”

“I never run away from an enemy,” the Kentuckian said proudly. “It isn’t in the blood or in the breed.”

“That’s all right,” was the dogged reply; “I know you ain’t no coward. But you don’t understand ev’rything; an’ I ain’t a-goin’ to tell you. How-

somever, sometimes w'en a feller's head won't keep him out o' trouble, his heels has to."

"Won't you tell me what you mean?"

"Been tellin' you, fast as my tongue could clip," in a tone of deep chagrin and disgust. "Guess you're one o' them chaps that has to be struck by lightnin' 'fore they know it's thunderin'. What I mean is fer you to take a fool's advice an' light out at daybreak in the mornin'. 'Nother thing; you don't want to say nothin' to John Gaston n'r anybody else 'bout y'r rumpus with Marsh"—this in an impressive undertone.—"He has a good many friends in these parts."

Vance Chatham laughed carelessly as he made response:

"Really, my friend, your warning advice only makes me want to stay. And I *will* stay, if I can find an excuse—for a few days at least. My home's where my hat's off; and I can make it in this neighborhood as well as elsewhere."

"Don't you think of it!" Bill cried in genuine concern. "You're purty foolhardy, 'r you wouldn't 'ave gone into the water as you done; but I hope you ain't a fool *entirely*. You whipped Marsh Colby easy enough; but you can't whip him an' his whole—whole—whole crowd o' cronies. I know Marsh—know him jest as well's if I'd mixed the mud to make him—an' you don't want to have no further words with him. Remember what I say—an' swaller y'r tongue."

As Bill finished speaking we drew up to the granary door. My father was coming out from the house, swinging a perforated tin lantern that speckled the path with light.

CHAPTER III

BILL threw down the line, stiffly rolled from the saddle, and without a word commenced to unhitch.

"You're late gittin' back, Bill," said my father, as he set the lantern upon the ground and keenly eyed our companion.

"Better late 'n never," was the muttered reply. "Night drives all stragglers home—an' sometimes sends a stranger with 'em. John Gaston, that's Mr. Vance Chatham. He wants to stay all night with us. Better show him where to put his hoss."

Chatham had dismounted, and stood holding his mount by the rein. My father and he shook hands and murmured a few words of greeting. Then together they went to put Kaintuck in the stable.

When they returned a few minutes later Ruth had come out and lifted me from the wagon and was saying:

"Tom Gaston! Come right into the house; your hands are as cold as——"

Catching sight of the stranger, she broke off abruptly.

"Cold as a dog's nose," Bill completed, laughing.

Then he rattled on: "Ruth, this is Mr. Vance Chatham. He's goin' to stay over night with us; an' he's hungrier 'n a nestful o' young catbirds. You want to use him purty nice; 'cause we wouldn't 'ave

got 'cross the backwater at all, if it hadn't been for him. John, you'd better take the young feller to the house, an' hunt him up some dry duds. He's soaked to the skin. Whoa, Charley! Stand over, Dan! Gee! Gee!"

And off to the stable he went, with the horses, whistling.

Ruth had merely inclined her head and breathed the Kentuckian's name when introduced to him. Now she caught my hand and hurried me toward the house.

As we went she bent down to my ear and whispered:

"He *is* young, isn't he, Tom?"

"Who?" I returned, though I knew well whom she meant.

"The stranger."

"Vance Chatham?"

"Yes—yes!"—playfully shaking me.

"I guess so."

"Stuff! Don't you know?"

"Yes; he's a young *man*."

"And handsome?"

"I don't know—didn't see his face."

"He's tall and strong."

I made no reply.

"Where did you meet him?" she asked.

"At Colby's furnace."

"Where's he from?"

"Kentucky."

"And where's he going?"

I shook my head.

"And he's going to stay here all night?"

I nodded and yawned.

"My!" she exclaimed. "And we've only mush-and-milk for supper."

"Goody!" I cried.

"I know *you* like it," she laughed; "but *he* may not."

Then soberly—in evident worryment: "What'll we do! We didn't know what time you'd get back—and knew you'd be hungry when you did come, and be in a hurry for something to eat—so we thought we wouldn't cook a big supper and have it spoil. I don't know what to do!"

"I'll go and ask him if he *likes* mush-and-milk," I suggested innocently.

"Simpleton!" she laughed, squeezing my arm.

By this time we were at the door. Ruth, still smiling at my simplicity, pushed me into the house ahead of her. A fire burned in the wide fireplace. The flag hearth was aglow with warmth; the big sitting-room, with rosy light. In one corner Tildy Cramblett was weaving. The squeak' and clatter of the clumsy wooden loom was music to my ears. Ruth's spinning-wheel stood in the middle of the bare floor, a half-spun roll of wool dangling from the spindle. The tall eight-day clock at one side of the fireplace smiled a welcome—its hour-hand pointing to VII. How cheery it all was, compared to the dark and damp without! I was glad to get home.

"A stranger for supper, Tildy!" Ruth said briskly. "Come—we must have something more than mush-and-milk."

"A stranger!" Tildy gasped, getting upon her

feet and waddling toward us. "Oh!"—with a short, jerky giggle—"you mean Tom."

"No," Ruth answered tartly, "a real stranger. He'll be in soon. Let's get supper, as fast as our feet and hands can fly. Come on, Tom, I want to talk to you."

"Mighty sakes!" ejaculated Tildy.

Then she clapped a hand over her mouth, silently tittered for a moment—and was as solemn-visaged as a sphinx.

I followed the two across the roofed passage separating the halves of the log structure, to the kitchen—occupying the farther end of the building. The place was spotlessly clean; the bare floor, of ashy whiteness. An iron pot was bubbling and simmering upon the crane in the fireplace; a Dutch oven, its lid heaped with coals, was upon the hearth; a lighted candle sputtered and winked upon the mantelshelf. Against the log wall stood a walnut dresser with open shelves filled with dishes, and upon a side table piles and rows of crocks and scoured tinware shimmered in the dancing firelight. A number of splint-bottomed chairs stood about the room; and a long dining-table—a home-made affair—set for supper, occupied the middle of the floor.

I sniffed the savory odor of baking pone in the Dutch oven, and capered around the room.

"The pone's almost done, Tildy," Ruth remarked, lifting the lid of the oven with a pair of tongs. "We can have it hot for supper. I did mean to keep it for to-morrow; but no matter. You run out to the smokehouse and fetch in a ham—a ham, mind you,

and not a shoulder. Then you can bring the milk from the cellar. Hurry, now! I'll set the coffee to boil and make the mush. Tom, shovel some coals out on the hearth, and set the spider on them."

Soon supper was well under away. The ham sizzled and sputtered in the spider; the mush popped and bubbled in the kettle upon the crane; and the coffeepot sang and danced upon its bed of coals. Appetizing odors filled the room; and apprized me that I was very, very hungry. Tildy bustled and puffed. Ruth glided here and there—and plied me with questions innumerable about our homeward trip and the interesting stranger.

Armed with a long hickory paddle, I industriously stirred the pasty mush—and enlarged upon our experience at the ford. As I told of Chatham's reckless act and grew eloquent over the gallantry of his horse, Ruth's eyes became wondrous bright and her bosom rose and fell spasmodically.

But I said not a word of the stranger's encounter with Marsh Colby. I do not know why I did not, for I was in the habit of telling Ruth everything. Perhaps Tildy's presence kept me quiet on that particular subject; I cannot now recall.

The hot mush continued to pop; and each miniature explosion sent a tiny cloud of steam eddying up the chimney. Shielding my scorching cheek with one hand, I continued to stir vigorously. Presently I heard the outer door of the sitting-room open and close. I knew the men had come to the house; and I desired to go to them—and to escape the bondage of the mush-paddle.

"Isn't this mush about done?" I appealed petulantly, to Ruth.

"Stir it—stir it fast, or it will burn!" was the disappointing reply she made, as she circled the table, polishing each shiny plate with a dry cloth.

But soon she came to my relief, swung the crane outward, and lowered the pot to the hearth.

"There," she said. "Now you may go and see how soon they'll be ready for supper."

As I started to pass to the sitting-room, Bill Kirk stumbled into the kitchen, from the passage, laden with dripping bedclothes."

"Where'll I put 'em, Tildy—where'll I put *our* quilts an' things?" he panted.

"Hang 'em on the line in the loft, you dunce!" she snapped, stooping to turn the slices of ham in the spider. "Think we want to eat 'em fer supper?"

"Now, Tildy!" he said wheedlingly, doing his best to assume an aggrieved expression of voice and countenance, yet slyly winking at Ruth. "You know how I jest fairly worship you, Tildy! Why will you treat me so kind o' cold an' haughty-like? Why don't you speak kind an' gentle to me—temperin' the wind to the sheared sheep, as it was? Tildy! Tildy! How I *do* love you!"

"Bill Kirk," she screeched, stamping her foot and flushing an apoplectic purple, "if you don't go up the stairs an' behave y'rself I'll—I'll scald you with this coffee! Now, shut y'r fly-trap, you fool—an' git out o' the road!"

This last with a spiteful slap at him, as he dodged past her and went clattering toward the stairs.

"The pesterin' lunny!" she grumbled, setting the coffeepot upon the table and smoothing her tow-linen apron.

Then abruptly, and with a short laugh: "Why, Ruth, that boy hain't gone to ask the men 'bout supper. There he stands in the door, grinnin' an' showin' his teeth like a pantin' dog."

"Tom Gaston!" Ruth cried, with a show of irritation. "Now, you skeedaddle!"

I found Chatham alone in the sitting-room, leaning with one arm upon the mantel, steam rolling in clouds from his saturated garments.

He had removed his limp hat, and his auburn hair clustered in crisp ringlets upon his neck and temples. His clothing was of fine dark cloth, and his high-topped riding-boots aroused my boyish admiration.

He was smooth-faced, youthful—barely twenty-five—tall, straight and rather slender. But his blue eyes were frank and fearless; his lower jaw was square and heavy. He easily escaped being handsome; but there was a devil-may-careness about him that was dangerously seductive—a *bonhomie* that was infectious. His voice—having a manly ring to it, but soft-cadenced and sweet as a woman's—had attracted me; now his revealed personality drew me to him and held me.

"Hello, Tom!" he said, turning toward me, as I reached the hearth. "Is supper about ready?"

"I come to see if you was ready," I replied with an inane grin.

"Ready, but hardly prepared," he laughed, glancing ruefully at his steaming garments.

And, although I did not comprehend the subtlety of his remark, I laughed also and felt perfectly at home in his presence.

He proceeded to explain: "Your father's gone to get me some dry clothes. I'd have let these dry on me, but he wouldn't hear of it. I've slept in wet clothing—many a time. He's coming now, I think."

My father entered through the rear door which led to the frame ell, a short-stemmed clay pipe between his teeth and a suit of his own butternut linsay-woolsey over his arm.

"Try these," he said brusquely. "They're too big for you, of course, but they're dry. You can go up stairs to the bedroom an' change. Tom, is supper 'most ready?"

I answered in the affirmative. Chatham ascended the open stairs in the corner at one side of the fireplace. A few minutes later he returned.

Flinging his wet clothing and a broad leather belt over the back of a chair and pushing it near to the fire, he said smilingly:

"That belt contains my money—what little I have. It's all in coin, fortunately, and the water couldn't injure it. But the belt ought to dry. I presume it'll be safe there?"

"Safer'n if it was in the bank at Malconta," my father grunted grumpily, placing his pipe upon the mantelshelf and expectorating into the ashes. "Much of it?"

And he cast a covetous side glance at the plethoric belt.

"Not much," Chatham replied. "The gain of it wouldn't make anyone rich; but the loss of it would make me poor. It's all I have."

"It'll be perfectly safe—safe, if ther' was a million dollars of it," my father answered him. "Le's go to supper."

We proceeded toward the kitchen. I could not keep from smiling at the figure the stranger cut. My father's home-made suit was an ill-proportioned makeshift for such long, slender limbs as our guest had. Coat and trousers enveloped his person like two loose bags, but failed to reach his extremities by several inches.

Taking notice of my suppressed merriment, and laughing heartily himself, he patted my head and remarked:

"Tom, you're making fun of me. But I can't blame you; I *am* an ungainly fowl."

"In such feathers, you are," my father said apologetically, but grinning broadly in spite of himself. "I'm sorry I couldn't do no better for you; but——"

"Never mind, Mr. Gaston," Chatham broke in hastily, as we reached the kitchen door. "I'm under great obligations to you. These clothes are all right; they're dry and warm—just what I need for the present."

Ruth and Tildy smiled at his appearance—and he smiled back at them, and Bill hawhawed outright.

The ice was broken, and everybody felt at ease.

The meal passed off pleasantly. Ruth sat at the

head of the board, and poured the coffee and passed the various dishes. My father did not grumble about household affairs, nor find fault with the food, as he was in the habit of doing. On the contrary, he played the part of genial host to perfection. Chatham ate heartily, and praised the cooking to an extent that caused the red to deepen in Ruth's cheeks. And—sly and observant young rascal!—I caught him casting admiring eyes at her trim figure and pretty oval face.

Bill and Tildy sat at table with us; caste was unknown in our home, or in the rural neighborhood, for that matter.

Supper over, the men adjourned to the sitting-room. I lingered a moment to ask Ruth what she thought of our guest.

"He's nice-acting but not very nice-looking," she whispered in reply to my question. Then, after a moment's hesitation: "Still he *is* nice-looking, in a way."

"Oh, Ruth!" I tittered. "You must be in love with him, to think him at all nice-looking in father's clothes."

The red flamed in her cheeks, as it had done under his ardent gaze at the table, and she placed her hand over my mouth and hurriedly cautioned:

"Hush! Hush, Tom! They're talking out in the passage—and the door's partly open. He'll hear you. The idea of me being in love with a stranger! Don't you dare to hint such a silly thing again. And, Tom,"—in a coaxing tone,—“you won't say anything before him to make me ashamed, *will* you?”

"No, I won't," I promised meekly.

"You know what I mean, Tom," she continued, putting a plump arm around my neck and drawing me to her. "You won't say anything about—about my red cheeks, if I happen to blush."

"Of course I won't!" I answered indignantly. "I'm not a *fool*, Ruth."

"No, indeed," she laughed. "But you're a mischievous boy, Tom; and that's worse, sometimes. But you *will* be good to-night, won't you?"

"Uh-huh," I promised.

She kissed me and let me go.

In the sitting-room I found Bill and our guest, smoking and chatting. The latter looked up as I entered, and said smilingly:

"Tom, do you want to do an errand for me?"

"Yes, *sir*," I returned with alacrity.

"All right. Run out to the stables and bring my revolver to me. You'll find it in the holster of my saddle."

"An' you'll find the saddle hangin' in the barn," Bill supplemented, his face half-hidden behind a cloud of rank tobacco smoke, "third peg to the right o' the little door. An' don't go to foolin' with the pistol; it's loaded."

"No danger of its going off, Tom," Chatham said reassuringly: "It's well soaked. Hurry back with it, please; I want to draw the loads and oil it up."

"I'm not afraid of it, anyhow," I answered, sturdily. "I've shot off a gun many a time, Mr.—Mr.——"

I hesitated at the formal address.

"Chatham," Bill suggested.

"I've shot off a gun many a time, *Vance*," I completed with an air of proud familiarity.

Both laughed, and Bill remarked:

"You're gittin' purty familiar fer such short acquaintance, ain't you, Tom? Familiar as the inquisitive end of a bumblebee, seems to me."

I caught up my hat and made for the door, my face burning.

"No harm done, Tom," Vance called after me. "That's all right; call me what you please."

I did not pause, but shot out the door. As it was closing behind me I heard my new-found friend saying to Bill:

"I like boys; and I like to be informal and friendly with them. A boy is the raw stuff out of which a man is made. You and I are nothing but overgrown boys, ourselves."

That remark relieved me of embarrassment—and cooled my face; and ere I had reached the road I was congratulating myself upon my unexampled temerity.

When I had crossed the highway and was about to turn the corner of the barn my roving sight for a moment caught the flicker of a light behind the granary. I stopped in my tracks. The pawing of a restless horse came to my ears. The sound did not emanate from the unfloored stables. Then I heard voices in guarded conversation. Again the light flickered into sight; and I saw its tattooed shimmer upon the side of the barn.

Retracing my steps a short distance, I moved cautiously to the front of the granary. There I again stopped, my heart beating tumultuously. More distinctly I heard the voices and the dull pawing of the impatient steed. Noiselessly I glided around the angle of the building, dropped upon hands and knees and crawled to the next corner.

There I paused and cautiously peered from cover. My father and Marsh Colby were before me, engaged in absorbing conversation. The former carried a tin lantern; the latter held a horse by the rein.

Quick as a flash I jerked back my head, crouched upon the damp earth, and lay panting with excitement. I had no scruples and I determined to hear what they were saying.

"Hold up y'r lantern an' look at my face." It was Marsh's voice. "All beat into a jelly! If you think I'm goin' to let that whelp get away from me without a good lickin', you're damned bad mistaken, John Gaston, that's all!"

"Pshaw!" my father said soothingly. "Marsh, you're too hot-headed. Y'r face ain't very bad beat up. You'll be over it in a few days. Of course I know you could bring a crowd of the boys here, drag the young dandy out o' the house, an' pummel the life out o' him. But what'd the result be? Why, it'd raise talk—do *that* much, anyhow. An' we don't want to draw no partic'lar 'tention towards ourselves, jest at present. You know there's *some* talk now—know it well's I do. We can't afford to raise no more. Jest let the thing go."

Then, after a momentary pause: "But I don't see

how he come to give you such hard licks in the face, Marsh. You're purty handy with y'r fists; an' I didn't think anybody could knock you down, 'r——"

"But he *did* knock me down," Marsh interrupted, with a savage oath; "knocked me silly—crazy! I thought at first he'd hit me with a club 'r stone. But he didn't; he hit me with his fist."

"Well, you'll jest let it go—fer the present, anyhow."

"I will?"—angrily.

"Yes."

"Like hell I will!"—cracking his fists. "I won't do nothin' o' the kind!"

"Marsh," my father said impressively, "do you want me to report you to the captain?"

"Cuss the captain—an' you too!" the big ruffian growled fiercely.

There was silence for a half minute. Then I heard my father say in hoarse, measured accents:

"Marsh Colby, the captain has put me in command here. You're drunk an' mad—that's plain. But don't you dare to disobey my orders; 'r I'll report you to Shep. An' you know what that means. Means you *might* come up missin'—as Bob Vernon done; an' y'r folks not never learn y'r address."

Again there was an impressive silence—suddenly broken by the startling snort of the giant's horse. The beast had thrust its nose against the lantern upon my father's arm, and, frightened, had shied away from it.

"Whoa!" Marsh muttered, giving the animal a violent jerk that almost set it upon its haunches.

Then, in a mollified tone, he said to my father:

"What's the feller doin' here, anyhow, do you think?"

"I don't know."

"Where'd he come from?"

"Kentucky."

"I knowed that much. That's where Kaintuck went, too. What's his name?"

"Vance Chatham, he says."

"The cussed fop! *Maybe* that's his name. Where's he goin'?"

"I hain't got no idee."

"Maybe he's jest come here to raise trouble."

"No, he hain't. How could he know anything 'bout us ever havin' the hoss? An' if he did know, he wouldn't come all the way up here jest to git a chance to give up the hoss to its right owner. He ain't no such fool as that—you bet! No, he's travelin'—jest goin' through. I'll start him on a road, in the mornin', that'll steer him clear of ol' George Simpson—'r anybody else that might know the hoss. Then we'll be red o' him, an' can rest easy. By the way, Shep's got his eye on some twenty good ones. He'll move 'em in a week 'r two—most of 'em from 'way out on Sunday creek."

"John, are you sure the hoss *is* Kaintuck?"

"Purty near. How 'bout you?"

"I didn't git a good look at the critter."

"Le's go in an' look at him now. If he ain't Kaintuck, he's a dead match fer him—an' a mighty good

tackey. Tie y'r hoss to the fence an' come on. Fer you must be gittin' 'way from here; someone might come out, an' think somethin'."

I lay still until their footsteps had died away and I heard the stable door open and shut. Then, with a sigh of relief, I arose and hurried away upon my mission.

The horse-stable was an inclosed shed at one end of the barn, the mangers of the stable opening upon the floor of the main building.

I entered the small door in the front of the larger structure. Feeling about in the darkness, I soon found Vance's saddle and secured the revolver for which I had been sent.

Although I was conscious of the subdued buzz of voices in the stable, and could catch occasional gleams of light from the dim lantern my father carried, I had no fear of discovery; for the barn was densely dark. So I resolved to hear what more the men had to say.

Presently I found a position that enabled me to look into the stall where they stood, without myself being seen. Marsh was holding the lantern; my father was standing by the side of Kaintuck, his chin upon the horse's withers.

"'Bout fifteen hands an' a half," he muttered *sotto voce*.

"Jest Kaintuck's height, if I remember," said Marsh in a strident whisper.

"An' he'll tip the scales at 'bout 'leven hundred—not twenty-five pounds one way n'r t'other," my father announced, standing back and critically sur-

veying the beautiful animal, as Marsh flashed the light about the stall.

"Jest what Kaintuck weighed," was the giant's low comment.

My father nodded, and went on musingly: "Small head an' ears; arched neck; flat-boned, cordy legs; a full tail—an' he carries it well out an' a l-e-e-tle to one side; ches'nut sor'l; an' a long white stockin' on the left hind foot."

"Kaintuck—to a gnat's heel!" Marsh exclaimed.

"Yes," my father cried, with an explosive oath, giving the horse a resounding slap with his open palm, "an' he's a Denmark—an' he's *Kaintuck!*"

The high-strung animal danced around in the stall and attempted to turn and nip at the intruders.

After a moment's silence Marsh remarked:

"Well, I must be goin'. It's a hard road to travel—from here to the furnace is. I had to come 'cross the hills; couldn't git along the bottoms, without a wettin'. You goin' to let Shep know, John?"

"Know what?"

"'Bout Kaintuck."

"Oh!"—and my father laughed teasingly.—"Of course—when I see him. I thought maybe you meant was I goin' to let Shep know 'bout the tantrums you've cut up to-night."

"Don't git smart, now!" Marsh snarled sulkily. "I hain't cut no tantrums."

"Oh, you hain't!"—sneeringly.

"No, I hain't!"—fiercely. "But I'll be cussed if I don't, if that Kaintucky dandy's here an hour after daylight to-morrow mornin'!"

"He won't be."

"All right, then. I'm goin'. Say!"—abrutly
—"you goin' out to Ed Bailey's sale to-morrow?"

"Yes," my father answered, yawning. "I'll have the pleasure of ridin' a piece with the Kentucky gentleman."

"B'lieve I'll go out, too," Marsh said as he started for the door. "But I can't go till afternoon, I guess. I wish——"

He suddenly stopped speaking, his hand upon the latch, and turned and faced my father.

"What's the matter?" the latter inquired in a startled voice. "Think you heard somebody?"

"No," Marsh replied, smilingly shaking his head. "Ther' ain't nothin' the matter. Here's y'r lantern. I just happened to think o' somethin'."

"What was it?"

Marsh leaned over and whispered hissingly:

"How would it do fer somebody—me an' you fer instance—to run off with the hoss at once, to-night? That would settle ev'rything."

I breathlessly awaited my father's answer.

"'Twon't do," he said decidedly. "We'd only make a bad muss worse—have the sheriff down on us, an' no end o' trouble."

"The sheriff couldn't find the hoss—where we'd put him."

"Maybe not; but he'd find us—me, anyhow. The feller's my guest—his hoss is in my stable. No, I won't do it, Marsh—'twon't do at all. There's too much of a stink now. We've got to be mighty keerful from this on, 'r we'll run our necks into a noose.

I'd thought o' that plan, 'fore you come. I'd like to hold on to the hoss, that's a fact. He's the best tackey we've ever had—brought us a clean five hundred; an' he'd do more'n that, now. But 'twon't do."

"I wish Shep was here," Colby remarked meditatively.

"So do I," was the candid admission of my father. "But he ain't—an' that's all ther' is of it. Still he couldn't do more'n us; fer I wouldn't hear to no med-dlin' with my visitor n'r his property. I may be a damned scalawag an' hoss-thief; but I'll pr'tect the man that takes shelter under my roof."

"Bosh!" Marsh snarled. Then, with startling suddenness: "John Gaston, when am I to marry that gal?"

"Never—if you don't learn to obey orders better."

"I do obey orders. Who does better, I'd like to know? But I ain't no child—no idiot, to be bossed around."

"Well—well!" my father said impatiently. "You can marry the gal in the spring; she'll be of age, then. 'Twon't do 'fore that time; the law'd step in an' upset our plans."

"An' I'm to have half o' ev'rything—money, an' stock, an' land, an' ev'rything?"

"Of course—of course!"—irritably. "That's all settled."

"All right then. I'll——"

Knowing their secret conference was about over, I waited to hear no more. Excited and panting, I

dashed into the sitting-room, the big Colt's revolver in my hand.

"Well, you *are* a swift messenger, Tom," Bill grinned. "You don't let no grass grow under y'r heels—you don't. It didn't take a bit over a half 'r three-quarters of an hour fer you to go to the barn an' back. You're purty near as swift as ol' Lem Shuster. It alluz took him from sunup to sundown to dress hisself. So he jest greased an' went naked, like an Injin."

"There was no particular hurry, Tom," Vance remarked with an assuring smile, reaching for the firearm.

My hand shook and my lip trembled as I handed it to him. My restrained emotions were about to gain the ascendancy.

"Look at him!" Bill cried serio-comically, drawing down the corners of his wide mouth, squinting his one eye, and holding up his great paws—palms outward. "His hand's quiverin' like a snake's tongue. Guess you must 'ave run onto a passel o' ghosts out there in the dark, didn't you, Tom? Didn't, eh?"—as I shook my head and dropped into a chair. "Well, if ever you do, youngster, you want to drop right down on y'r pray'r-bones an' pray the pray'r the ol' Irish woman prayed w'en she heerd a whoopin'-crane fer the first time: 'Oh, Lord, pickle us an' pr'sarve us from witches, an' waylicks, an' wawhoolicks, an' long-billed things that goes flyin' up an' down the creek, hollerin' whickity-whay-honk in the noight-toime!'"

I attempted no reply. Kirk sat and silently re-

garded me for some minutes, a shrewd but puzzled expression upon his homely visage. Evidently he was thinking deeply, striving to fathom the meaning of my agitation. But I offered no explanation, and soon he left off staring at me and turned his attention to Chatham, who already was industriously cleaning and polishing his revolver.

"Never seen a pistol like that before," Bill observed. "What do you call it, mister—w'en you don't go after it, and *have* to call it?"

"A Colt revolver,"—rubbing vigorously.

"Huh! I'd call it a jackass battery. It's got as many nipples as ther' was buttons on ol' Dick Jarvis's huntin'-shirt; an' it had more buttons 'n you could shake a stick at in a month o' Sundays. How many times does the thing shoot without loadin'?"

"Without reloading?"

"Well, call it *reloading*, if you're p'rtic'lar."

"Six times."

"Golly! Is that so? Whirls round like the wheel in a squir'l cage, don't it? What d'you want—some grease? Mutton taller do?"

"Yes," Vance answered. "And please bring me the flask of powder, box of caps, and bag of bullets you'll find in my saddlebags—in the corner, there."

Bill fetched the articles desired.

"S'pect the powder an' caps is wet," he mumbled, biting a chew from his piece of plug tobacco.

"No," Vance returned confidently, "they're all right. I keep them waterproof."

And he went on deftly reloading his weapon. When he had finished he laid it upon the mantel-shelf and drew a deep breath of satisfaction.

"Hadn't I better unpack that roll o' duds you had tied on behind y'r saddle, an' spread it out to dry?" Kirk suggested, jerking his thumb toward the corner where the bundle lay.

"Perhaps," Chatham assented, leaning back in his chair and gazing dreamily into the depths of the fire.

Bill, when he had finished his self-appointed task, seated himself, and he, too, sat staring into the red embers. Soon my father came in from the barn, however, breezy with good humor, and drew the silent two into conversation. And a few minutes later Ruth and Tildy joined us with their knitting, and the talk became general. But I sat in the dusky angle made by the chimney and the log wall, my knees drawn up to my chin, moodily silent, but closely observant of all that was going on.

Ruth rallied me on my unwonted taciturnity, and Bill and Tildy sought to rouse me by teasing me about a little girl in the neighborhood and saying I was lovesick. For a wonder, I did not resent their quips at my expense, but only smiled and nodded drowsily. Yet all the while my youthful brain was in a mad tumult and my overwrought imagination was running riot.

They gave over teasing me at last and Bill said:

"Better go to bed, Tom. You're sleepier'n a hot Sunday afternoon. It makes me gap' to look at you."

"Do you want to go to bed, Tom?" Ruth asked.

I stupidly shook my head.

"Are you sick?" she inquired solicitously.

Another negative shake was my only answer.

Then they let me alone and went on with their talk and merriment. My father paid no attention to me whatever.

During a lull in the conversation Vance noticed an ancient violin upon the wall and inquired whose it was.

"That fiddle?" Bill replied. "That's mine. It—an' my everlastin' good-looks—is 'bout all the property I own. Course I've got a first mortgage on Tildy, but I ain't quite ready to foreclose it yit."

"Oh, shut up, Bill Kirk!" she retorted, ending with an asthmatic giggle, her face scarlet and her knitting needles flying like mad.

"Do you play?" Vance inquired of the convulsed Bill.

"Play?" echoed that worthy. "Well, I *reckon* I play!"

"By note or by ear?"

"By main strength an' awkwardness, princip'ly," Bill answered. "You see, I don't play but one tune, an' that's the tune the ol' cow died on. Do *you* play?"

"A little," Vance replied, smiling at the fellow's earnestness.

"Well, here goes, then!" Bill shouted, jumping up and taking down the fiddle and bow. "There's

a lump o' rosum on the mantel there. Tune 'er up. An' I'll shake a foot with Tildy. Won't I, ol' sweetheart?"

"Take that, you big ninny!" she cried, dealing him a box on the ear, as he bent over her, simpering and winking.

"Ruth," my father suggested, "before Mr. Chatham begins to play, you run to the cellar an' bring up a pitcher o' cider an' a pan o' apples. We'll eat, drink and be merry fer one more night, anyhow. Git the cider from that iron-hooped bar'l; it's got the snap to it."

"Come and hold the candle for me, Tom," Ruth said, throwing aside her knitting.

With surprising alacrity I started to obey. I desired to be alone with her, if only for a few minutes, to give her a hint of the matters that were harassing my weary brain.

"Gosh!" Bill ejaculated. "Tom's as spry as a tree-toad after a show'r. I thought he was asleep—noddin' over there in the dark. Must want cider an' apples awful bad—*Tom* must."

And I caught from his words and the look that he gave me that he suspected that I had something of importance to communicate to Ruth—something pertaining to my trip to the barn, that had to do with my moodiness—and that he meant to let me know that he understood the meaning of my readiness to accompany her to the cellar.

"Can't I be of service to you, in fetching the things, Miss Gaston?" Vance asked, with undisguised eagerness, half rising from his chair.

"No, thank you," she replied quickly. "Tom can give me all the help I need."

When we were alone in the deep, black cellar—with the potato and apple bins and rows of cobwebbed barrels and kegs looking grim and ghostlike around us, and the odors of fruit and cider in our nostrils—Ruth took me by the arm and said:

"Now, Tom Gaston, I want to know what's the matter."

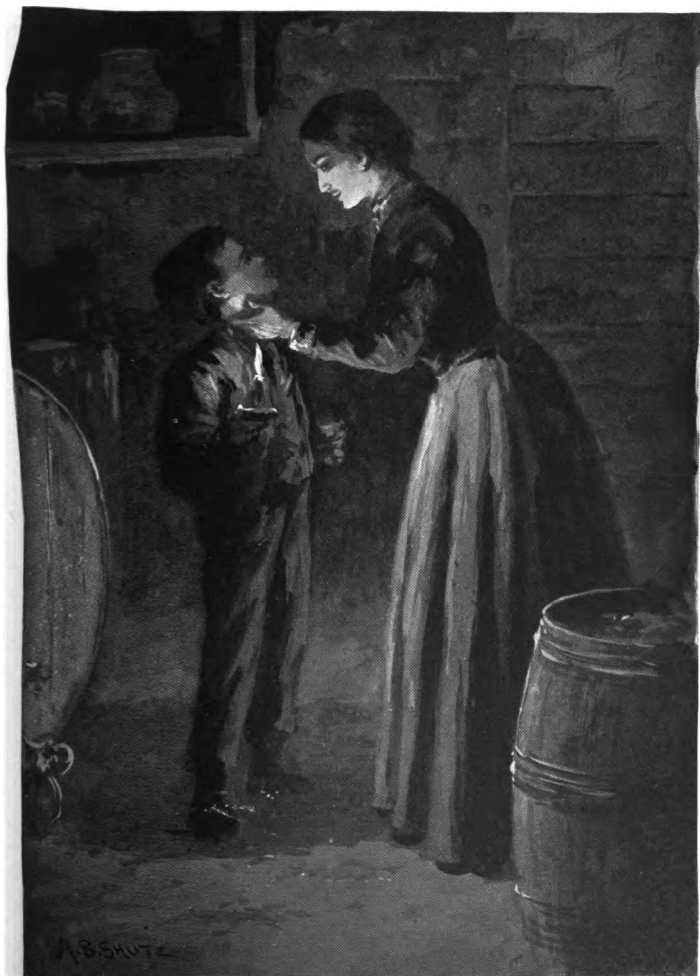
I wasted no time, but in a few short and hurried sentences gave a brief synopsis of all I had seen and heard. She listened breathlessly, her mobile countenance mirroring her changing emotions—surprise, anger, dread, shame and sorrow. When I had finished, I looked intently at her and waited for her to speak.

Her features appeared a trifle pale in the uncertain light of the tallow dip, and her eyes shone with an unusual fire, as she said in an awesome whisper: "It's terrible—dreadful, Tom! And Mr. Chatham had a fight with Marsh Colby—and whipped him! Oh, dear! What will come of it all? I'm so sorry, Tom, you've learned about—about what I've—I've feared——"

She stammered—then went on resolutely: "But you mustn't breathe a word of it to anyone, Tom—not a word, promise me."

I nodded, blinking at the candle in her hand.

"We can do nothing—at present," she went on rapidly. "We must wait. Now, let's get the cider and apples and go back. They'll be wondering what keeps us so long."



“Always and ever your sister, Tom, no matter what others
may say.”

She handed me the candle; filled the pan with rosy apples; and, tucking back her linsey skirt, stooped and began to draw the sparkling cider.

Of a sudden it dawned upon me what, of all I had learned, was of gravest import to me. Tremulously I muttered:

“But, Ruth, you *are* my sister, aren’t you?”

In answer, she left the fizzling cider to itself, impulsively flew to me, and, catching me in her arms, cried: “Always and ever your sister, Tom—no matter what others may say, no matter what may come!”

Her wet lashes swept my cheek as she bent back my head and kissed me.

Then she playfully pushed me from her; and, almost brushing out the flame of the candle I held in my hand, she ran back to the neglected pitcher.

“Oh, Tom!” she laughed, a plaintive tremble in her voice. “The cider’s run over and wet the floor. What a waste—and what would father say if he knew! Well, give me the candle; you may carry the apples. Up we go.”

“And you won’t ever marry Marsh Colby, will you, Ruth?” I pursued on reaching the stairs.

“Never!” she replied, with a proud toss of her pretty head and an angry stamp of her little foot. “I despise the very ground he walks on—the big drunken brute!”

“And—and, Ruth, you won’t ever marry *anybody*, will you?” I continued insistently.

• It was good to see her laugh, as she replied:

"Not unless I get a good chance, Tom; and not until I get a good ready."

I felt infinitely relieved; and, on our return to the sitting-room, I participated in the gayeties of the others. Vance played the violin for an hour or more, his fingers flying, his blue eyes dancing. Never had we heard such music. In it were singing birds, rippling streams, and murmuring breezes. Bill patted his foot industriously, and Tildy tittered, her needles seeming to flash to the measure of the tunes. My father sat and phlegmatically smiled and smoked, and drank glass after glass of the heady cider. I silently and greedily drank in the liquid, melodious delight, and forthwith resolved to be a violinist.

At last Ruth could maintain her demure attitude of unconcern no longer. In abandon to the delicious, entrancing strains, she arose and gracefully waltzed up and down the room. Vance watched her admiringly, until he almost forgot to play; and she, becoming conscious of his ardent gaze, blushed in confusion and regained her chair and her knitting.

How I remember that evening! Ah, how I remember it all!

When the tall clock in the corner marked ten my father got upon his feet and, stretching and yawning, said:

"It's bedtime. Tom, you and the gals be off. Us men'll take a nightcap 'fore we go."

Already his legs were unsteady and his voice was thick from the draughts he had taken.

"Tom, you may sleep upstairs, with Mr. Chatham," Ruth remarked casually, as she and Tildy

withdrew to the ell; "father will sleep with Bill, in the loft."

And she gave me a meaning look that I had no trouble in interpreting. Fearing what schemes might be in John Gaston's drunken brain, she meant to place him as far as possible from his guest—in the low room over the kitchen.

I immediately went to bed. Presently Vance came up the stairs, laden with his belongings. Having placed his revolver under his pillow, he undressed, blew out the light, and crept into the bed across the room from mine.

Soon the house was still—and I was asleep.

CHAPTER IV

"Tom, are you awake?"

The words were softly breathed into my sleep-dulled ear, but they penetrated to the depths of my inner consciousness. My eyes flew open, and I popped up in bed.

A full moon peeping in through the curtainless window flooded the room with silvery light. Vance Chatham, partly dressed and his finger upon his lips, was bending over me. I crooked my elbows, yawned, and opened my mouth to speak.

"Be still!" he said in a faint whisper, his face close to mine.

"Is it morning?" I mumbled in reply.

I was not fully awake.

"Sh!" he cautioned, placing a hand over my mouth.

Then he seated himself upon the side of my bed, put his arm around me, and continued in the same cautious tones:

"No, it isn't morning. But someone came into the house through the front door a few minutes ago, and has been moving about in the room below. Listen!"

I did so, and heard the shuffle of feet upon the bare floor, the click of heels upon the hearth. Then the audacious intruder commenced to replenish the fire, throwing on stick after stick, and punching

and raking at the coals. Presently the red light of the kindling blaze flashed up the open stairway and played upon the walls of our room.

"Who can it be?" Vance whispered.

"Don't know," I answered sleepily.

I was not at all alarmed and but little concerned, and rather wondered that my companion was making so much of the matter. I think I should have dropped back upon my pillow and again sought oblivion had not my companion continued, gently shaking me:

"Do you think it can be your father or Kirk, Tom?"

"No," I replied flatly.

"The door was unlocked," he pursued. "Is it left so of nights?"

"Yes,"—with another protracted yawn.

"Ah!"—in a tone of relief. "Then it's a neighbor, or a chance traveler like myself, probably."

"Uh-huh," I grunted, vigorously rubbing my eyes.

The fog of sleep had lifted; my brain was clear. Now I understood the reason of my companion's concern. He had thought the door left unlocked on purpose, and feared foul play from some quarter. And from whence or whom could he have expected it? Marsh Colby! In a moment it was all plain to me. Vance Chatham had not been unmindful or careless of his own safety. He had lain with his revolver under his pillow and had not slept at all, probably. But why had he looked for a midnight visit from Marsh? Had he learned, in some mysteri-

ous way, of the giant's evening call upon my father?

I was lost in thought, when he recalled me with:

"At any rate, it's no one who will disturb my horse, eh?"

It was a random remark, as I learned long afterward—but it had the effect of confirming my recently aroused suspicions. He must know everything, I reasoned illogically; and perhaps he had come into the neighborhood to make trouble for the gang of horse-thieves, as Marsh Colby had surmised. I was startled—dismayed; and my brow grew moist with cold sweat. I put my feet out upon the floor and made a move to arise, no well-defined purpose in my mind.

"Wait a moment," Vance said, pulling me down by his side. "What's he doing now?"

I listened intently. A measured, screaming sound came to my ears.

"He's rocking in one of the big rockers," I replied. "It must be David Ryal. That's the way he always comes in and does."

"Then, on a sudden, a stentorian voice arose, singing:

"At dead of night, whilst others slept,
Near hell I took my station;
And from that dungeon dark and deep,
O'erheard this conversation:

"Hail, Prince of Darkness! Ever hail,
Adored of each infernal!
I come among your gang to wail,
And taste of death eternal.

"To weep and howl, in endless pain,
Among your frightful legions;
To gnaw my tongue and clank my chain,
In these infernal regions.'

"Where are you from?' the fiend demands.
'What makes you look so frantic?
Are you from Carolina's strand—
Just west of the Atlantic?

"Are you that man of blood and birth—
Devoid of human feeling—
The wretch I saw when last on earth,
In human cattle dealing?'"

"That is him," I murmured ungrammatically;
"that's David Ryal."

"Who is he?" Vance inquired. "*What* is he?"

"An ab—abo—abolitionist," I replied, wrestling
with polysyllabic word.

The song went on, the singer's rich resonant voice
billowing up the stairway:

"I'm from the South,' the ghost replied;
'And I was there a teacher,
With laughing eyes saw men in chains—
I was a Southern preacher.

"And when I saw the horrid sight
Of slaves by torture dying,
I told their masters all was right,
I knew that I was lying!'"

"I'm going down," I cried aloud, jerking from
Vance's restraining grasp and reaching for my
trousers. "David sings lots of songs like that; I'm
going down."

"I think I'll go down, too," my companion re-

marked quietly. "I want to meet an abolitionist. He's a genuine specimen, is he, Tom?"

But I was halfway to the head of the stairway, buttoning my clothing as I went, and I made no reply.

As my head appeared below the opening of the floor, Ryal looked up at me and smiled and nodded, but continued to sing:

"I now am in a sea of fire,
Whose fury ever rages;
I am a slave, and can't get free
Through everlasting ages!"

"Yes, when the sun and moon shall fade,
And fire the rocks dis sever,
I must sink down beneath the shades—
And feel God's wrath forever!"

I seated myself upon the hearth, my back against the jamb of the fireplace, my knees hugged to my breast—and silently watched him, my bare feet patting time to his swinging cadences. With his double chin tilted aloft and his gaze rapturously fixed upon the smoke-browned joists, he rocked and rocked and reeled off one doggerel stanza after another.

He was a fleshy man of sixty years, his big, round head bald, save a strip of snow-white hair at the base of his occiput. His face, bare-shaven, except a stubby fringe beneath his chin, was smooth and round as a baby's; and his full cheeks were netted with innumerable small purplish veins. A suit of butternut linsey-woolsey hung loosely upon his muscular frame. He was of average stature and round-shouldered—a forceful, obstinate, fanatical man of

much more than ordinary natural abilities. He stood ready at all times to defend his principles—to die for them, if necessary; and the one word, “abolition,” included them all.

Chatham descended to the sitting-room, clad in his own garments. David greeted him as he had greeted me—with a smile and a nod, but clung tenaciously to his interminable song. At last he wound up, with:

“The demon cried—on vengeance bent:

‘I say in haste retire;

And you shall have a negro sent

To punch and stir the fire!’”

Then, smiling an affable, self-satisfied smile, he turned to Vance and said:

“Good-evening, my Kentucky friend.”

“Good-morning, rather,” Vance returned coolly, glancing at the clock. “It’s past midnight. But how do you know I’m a Kentuckian?”

“Do you admit that you are?”

“I do.”

“I know it from you, then,” David said, with a seraphic grin; “but I suspected it when I put my beast in the stable. I saw yours there—or felt over him, rather. A Kentucky saddler, if I’m not mistaken. My name is David Ryal. What’s yours, my young friend?”

“Vance Chatham.”

“And you come from the Dark and Bloody Ground—dark and bloody in the past, dark and bloody in the present. For the blot of slavery stains

the escutcheon of every Southern State; and the black cloud of God's terrible wrath hangs over them. But the time is rapidly drawing near when the blot will be erased; and then will the clouds roll away, and God will smile upon your fair commonwealth. You're not one of the Chathams near Lexington, are you?"

"I am."

"Is it possible? I spent a winter down there—let me see—about eighteen years ago; and I met a number of the Chathams. I found them nice people, but very set in their beliefs—very. What's your father's name—if he's living?"

"My father and mother are both dead," Vance answered stiffly, a tinge of sadness in his tone, a shade of annoyance in his manner. "My father's name was Richard, however."

"Indeed!" David proceeded. "And he lived about eight or ten miles out of town, on the road leading east?"

"Yes."

"Why, I've been at your house a number of times. I was a traveling Methodist exhorter in those days, and I've eaten more than one good meal at your father's table. Your mother was a lady—an educated, Christian lady. Her maiden name was Bradner, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Vance replied, evincing little interest.

"Yes," Ryal rambled on reminiscently, "I remember your parents well, and I *think* I remember you—a little shaver of eight or ten years. You were as full of mischief as a sugar-tree is of sap,

and wanting to ride every unbroken colt on the place. Yes, I used to have many heated arguments with your father on the slavery question. And I downed him every time, too, but he'd never own to it,"—with a mellow guffaw. "How long have your parents been dead, Mr. Chatham?"

"My father died about a year ago; my mother, a few months afterward."

"Too bad! too bad!" David murmured, slowly shaking his head. "A recent bereavement—and they were comparatively young, too. Too bad!"

At that moment Bill Kirk entered the room, barefooted, and one gallus hanging. Running his fingers through his tousled hair and gaping spasmodically, he sunk into a chair, and drawled:

"Dave Ryal, you beat all the men 'tween here an' nowhere. You come into a feller's house at midnight, as gentle an' quiet as a baby's breath, an' then, as soon as you're inside, you set up like a howlin' winter storm. Talk 'bout the bulls o' Basham! They wasn't a patchin' to you—not by a right smart consider'ble. You roar like ol' Limestone does w'en she's on a tear."

"Hush, Bill!" David said, shaking a fat finger at the newcomer. "Don't you see I'm talking to the young gentleman?"

"Young gentleman, hey?" Bill gurgled. . "Maybe you think *I* ain't a young gentleman, Dave Ryal. Young! I'm younger than ol' Sam Crocker was short; an' he was so short he had to stand on a stump to put his pipe in his mouth. He had a brother named Lem that was a long one, though. I

can jest remember seein' him. He stood the tallest and laid the longest of any critter that was ever in these parts. He used to say hisself that w'en he went to bed he had to shut himself up like a pocket-knife. Accounted fer his lack o' book-learnin' by sayin' that w'en he went to school he couldn't see the letters in the book on the master's knee; too tall, you understand.

"It was him that got mad at his ol' sow 'cause she had a litter o' sixteen pigs. Said the ol' rip never stopped to c'nsider where the corn was to come from to feed 'em all. He was——"

"Stop your clack, Bill!" David cried irritably, stamping his foot and frowning. "Your stream of senseless talk runs so fast that no one else can get a word in edgeways. Have you been drinking?"

"Nope," Bill answered solemnly, but winking and grimacing at me—which set me off in a snicker. "Nòt much, anyhow—not as much as a feller I knowed one time. He drunk so much cider it set his back teeth floatin'; come purty nigh losin' the whole shootin'-match of 'em. No, I ain't drunk, Dave; I'm jest stirred up like—wide awake. *You* done it. I laid up in the loft there an' tried to go to sleep ag'in; but I couldn't make it. So, thinks I, I'll jest come down an' help Dave Ryal make a night of it. An' I'm a-doin' my part, ain't I? You bet! But you fellers may talk a little bit now, while I lay off fer a few long breaths."

With a sigh of relief David turned to Vance and said:

"Your father used to keep slaves. I suppose you own them to-day."

"No," Chatham replied with evident reluctance, "I own but little besides my horse and the clothes upon my back. My father's estate was heavily encumbered; and after his death everything—slaves and all—went to pay debts."

"Can it be possible!" David exclaimed. "Why, your father was wealthy—had a fine, large estate. What brought about such an unfortunate state of affairs?"

"Mr. Ryal, you have been a guest at my father's house, have sat at his table and eaten of his bread," was the calm and cold reply; "but you must question me no further on the subject. I think I recall you; and I know I remember my mother speaking of you as a friend of the family. Therefore, I'll not resent your rather impertinent inquiry; but I decline to answer it."

"As you please," David answered dryly. "I meant no harm; and, if I've hurt your feelings, I beg your pardon. I wanted to know why you had to dispose of your slaves, that was all. I'm greatly interested in the welfare of the black man, and——"

"Hold on, Dave Ryal!" Bill interrupted, throwing up his hands. "Don't start off on that trail, fer pity's sake! This young feller's a Kaintuckian; he's been brought up on a slav'ry diet. An' if you foller that track you're likely to run plump into him. You've got jest one cure fer ev'rything, Dave—abolition. Your way o' mendin' things is like ol' Doc Cuppy's way o' curin' rheumatiz."

"Tom Piper had a spell o' the disease one time, an' went to Cuppy to git some medicine. Tom was a kind of a Quaker, but he liked his bitters as well as the next one. Howsoever, he wouldn't take a dram, 'nless he could let on to hisself he was sick an' needed it.

"'Got the rheumatics, 'ave you,' says Doc, w'en Tom called on him.

"Tom groaned, an' walled his eyes like a mad hoot-owl, an' says: 'Yes, Doc—an' a mighty bad dose of it.'

"'Well, I know jest what'll cure you,' says Doc.

"'What?' says Tom, smackin' his lips—knowin' purty well what was comin'.

"'Git two gallons o' the best whisky you can find,' Doc goes on, 'put some ripe pokeberries in it, an' drink of the mixture.'

"'Bout how many pokeberries?' asks Tom.

"'Bout one pokeberry to a gallon o' liquor,' was Doc's answer.

"'An' how much 'll I take at a dose—an 'bout how often?' says Tom, twistin' an' groanin' like a cider-press.

"'A good big snifter, ev'ry time you think of it,' answers Doc, lookin' as solemncholy as a Quaker preacher.

"'Bully fer you, Doc!' hollers Tom, jumpin' to his feet an' caperin' 'round as spry as a woodpecker. 'You're the smartest doctor I ever run across. What's y'r bill? I'm ready to pay it. You're a doctor—you are; you know jest by lookin' at a feller

the kind o' medicine that suits his system. What's y'r bill?"

"An', Dave, you're a good deal like ol' Doc Cuppy. You——"

"Say!" David broke in on the fellow. "Don't you think, Bill, you'd better lay off again and take a few more long breaths?"

"Don't know but I had," the droll fellow snickered. "But I was jest goin' to tell you what an unlucky feller that Tom Piper was. The fact is, he never had *no* luck but *bad* luck. Went into a raffle fer a jug o' rye whisky, once, an' couldn't draw it—couldn't even draw the stopper. Terrible unlucky feller! He——"

"Do stop your foolishness, Bill!" David cried testily. "Let *me* talk; I'll talk sense, at least."

"Don't know 'bout that," Bill muttered aside to me.

"David turned his attention to Vance, saying: "What do you know of your ancestors, Mr. Chatham—if you don't mind telling me?"

"Very little," Vance replied, smiling good-humoredly. "I've always been proud of my ancestors, of course; but, not knowing how they might feel about me, I've never hunted them up to make their acquaintance."

"Never hunted them up—your ancestors," David laughed. "No, I suppose not. But they were New Englanders, if I'm not mistaken."

"I believe so."

"It was your grandfather that settled in Kentucky?"

"Yes."

"And he smirched the family record by becoming a slaveholder."

Bill started, and I held my breath, feeling that Ryal's words would be as flame to flax. Chatham's clear skin reddened—then paled. For a few moments he nervously thrummed the arm of his chair, but did not reply; David sat unconcernedly twirling his pudgy thumbs.

At last the young Kentuckian said quietly, constraint in his voice:

"You're an abolitionist, I believe, Mr. Ryal."

"I am," the old man returned complacently, his round face beaming with zeal for the cause he loved. "Or, to give the full appellation we usually receive, a *black* abolitionist. I'm more than that, however; I'm a conductor on the Underground railway."

"And you believe in freeing the slaves?"

"Why not?" David asked, drawing himself erect—a challenge in his tone and manner. "*Believe* in freeing them? I *am* freeing them—as fast as I can. As I said, my young friend, I'm a conductor on the Underground railroad. I'm one of the few who are not afraid to own to it. Many sympathize with our cause and secretly lend us aid, but are too cowardly to come out in the open. I don't fear to do right—under any and all circumstances."

The old abolitionist was quivering from head to foot, his eyes alight, his nostrils dilated.

Vance's lips set themselves in a tense, straight

line as he listened. Now he said passionately: "And you boast of stealing other people's property, do you, Mr. Ryal?"

"Stealing is a harsh word, Mr. Chatham, to apply to a humane act," David replied chokingly. "But I pass it by, to answer your question. I do boast of helping to liberate human beings. No man has a right to hold another as a chattel. Slavery is wrong—everlastingly and forever wrong. It has no right to exist in this or any other——"

"You forget that the Constitution grants the right," Vance interrupted sneeringly.

David mopped his brow, smiling suavely. He thought he saw a chance to push his young opponent into a corner, and he was elated at the prospect.

"The Declaration of Independence," he said impressively, "declares that all men are born free and equal—not white men alone, mind you, but *all* men. That is a human promulgation of a divine law. You say the Constitution grants the right of slavery. It does nothing of the kind. It simply recognizes the existence of the curse. No man or set of men—no matter what their office—can make a right of a wrong. And if the Constitution does sanction the existence of slavery, what then? Let's—alter—the—Constitution!"

"It never *will* be altered—in that respect!" Vance declared stoutly.

"But it *will*!"—in a shrill tone of fervor and excitement.

"Never!"

Then both disputants sat and glared at each

other for a full minute. Presently Vance said, with an outward show of calmness:

“If the central government ever attempts to steal away the rights of the individual States, the South will secede; the Union will be dissevered.”

I did not understand the meaning of all—nor half—they were saying; but I was wide awake and greatly interested, nevertheless. And now I impatiently awaited Ryal’s reply to the young Southerner’s bold declaration.

“State’s rights!” David grunted contemptuously. “It seems to me I’ve heard something of the kind before, young sir. John C. Calhoun used to preach that damnable doctrine; but Jackson clapped a stopper in his mouth. Hayne tried to defend it against Webster, but made a dismal and ridiculous failure. Now, my boy,”—in a softened voice and with a winsome smile—“it’s idle for you and me to argue this stupendous question. There is but one right side to the thing. I have that side; but you refuse to believe it. The greatest minds of the country have tried to solve the perplexing problem, in vain. They have temporized, compromised—failed. God, in due season, will settle it all. We must wait, with what patience we can. But you will live to see the disgrace of slavery wiped out; and the Union will be preserved, too. You’ll change your mind about the thing, if you remain long in the North. Slavery is like drunkenness in this: As soon as a man gets away from its baneful influence he condemns it. You, even, will be ready and eager to strike a blow, in the end.”

Vance uttered a decided negative.

Then he remarked tentatively: "The Bible upholds slavery."

"The old, old argument of every Southern preacher I've ever met," David said, smiling and shaking his head. "The Bible was always their final refuge. Yet all of them had to admit, when pinned down, that slavery was morally and socially wrong. Yes; the Bible upholds it—as it upholds bigamy and the divine right of kings. We of to-day have outgrown the latter two; in time we'll outgrow slavery. No matter what any book may say, your enlightened mind and conscience tell you that slavery is unjust. Am I not right?"

"No, you're not right," Chatham contradicted, "a bit more than you're right in the other assertions you've made. That's all your argument is—a bundle of mere assertions."

David smiled a complacent smile of superiority and pity, as he answered:

"I expected you to say that. You're not a free man, yourself; you're still under the thrall of early teaching and environment. Let me ask you a few questions. Did you willingly sell your slaves?"

"I didn't sell them; the sheriff did it," Vance responded bitterly. "They weren't mine to sell."

"Would you have sold them had they been yours?"

"Not unless forced to do so."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Because—because——"

Vance hesitated; then finished lamely: "Because I needed them; and because I liked them—as I liked the other stock on the farm. That's why."

"You wouldn't have hesitated to part with your horses and cattle, at a good price."

"N—o." Then, brightening: "I could have bought others, you know."

"And you could have bought other slaves."

"Y—e—s."

"Why hesitate to sell them, then?"

Vance was biting his nether lip, and made no reply.

"You needn't answer," David said; "I understand. Did they fall into the hands of good masters, when sold?"

"W—ell, not all of them, I fear," Vance reluctantly admitted.

"And were you sorry for the unfortunates?"

"Of course,"—bristling.

"And if you should find them trying to escape from bitter bondage, you'd aid them?"

"Indeed I would not,"—with positiveness.

"Why?"

"Because I'm not a black abolitionist."

Then both laughed heartily; and Bill Kirk broke in with:

"Say, you fellers! I've got my breath back, an' I'm goin' to talk a while. You two jest keep goin' 'round in a circle, anyhow—like a dog after his own tail. As I set here a-listenin' to you, I sized the whole thing up this way: A feller's politics, an' religion, an' other beliefs depends on how he's been

brung up, a good 'eal. People gits to be jest like Ben Thurlow's chickens. Guess neither one o' you ever heerd that yarn, so I'll spin it.

"Ben was a fisherman, he was, an' a sort o' ph'losopher, too. Used to say ther' was only two cents differ'nce 'twixt the feller that dreamed an' the feller that drudged, an' the feller that dreamed got it. Said the habit o' workin' was jest like other bad habits—liable to grow on a feller, till he couldn't keep from it."

"Look here!" Ryal cried petulantly. "Bill, if you *must* tell that silly story, tell it; and don't indulge in so many needless preliminaries."

"Pr'liminaries?" Bill retorted snappishly. "Who's doin' this, Dave Ryal—me 'r you?"

David sank back with a sigh of resignation, and vouchsafed no reply. Bill smothered his ruffled plumage by taking a fresh chew of tobacco, and proceeded:

"'Nother motto o' Ben's was that it's cheaper to move 'n it is to pay rent. So he was *alluz* movin'. Lived wherever he could git a roof to stick his head under; and was at home wherever night ketched him. He didn't have no fam'ly, but kept a dog an' a passel o' chickens. An' he got to movin' so derved often, them chickens knowed w'en the time come 'round—ev'ry full o' the moon; an' they'd flutter up to the front door, flop over on their backs, an' cross th'r legs—all ready to have 'em tied. I've seen 'em do it a hundr'd times; an'——"

"Bill! Bill!" Ryal exclaimed in a tone of deep disgust, but smiling in spite of himself.

Vance and I were laughing immoderately.

"It's a fact, if I ever told the truth in my life!" the perverse Bill asseverated stoutly. "An' most people's like Ben Thurlow's chickens. Give 'em long enough time an' they'll git used to anything; an' once they *are* used to it, they think it's all right—an' 're ready to lie fer it an' die fer it."

He paused reflectively, spat upon the hearth, and continued: "What you've said 'bout slav'ry, Dave, is all true, to my notion—truer 'n the ten commandments; but y'r way o' sayin' it is as roundabout as the road from Egypt to the Promised Land. You've been purty free askin' our Kaintucky friend fool questions; so now I want to play schoolmaster, an' ask him jest one. Mr. Chatham, if you was to meet a batch o' niggers tryin' to git away from the'r masters, you wouldn't help 'em, wouldn't you?"

"I would not," Vance replied resolutely.

"What would you do?"

"What would I do? Do what any honest man would do: inform the owner of their whereabouts and help him to recover his property."

I was greatly shocked at the open expression of such heretical sentiments; equally so were Ryal and Kirk, as I could plainly see. In blank silence we sat and stared at the audacious Southerner for some time. My Kentucky idol was tottering upon his pedestal; and I was grieved, sorely grieved.

Finally Bill said brokenly, repressed passion struggling for expression: "As I've—I've said before, I s'pose it depends a good 'eal on how a feller's brought up, as to how he'll look at things. A

man's raisin' excuses him of a good many fool mistakes. If a feller's been fed on mush an' cabbage, he'll alluz have a hankerin' fer that kind o' grub. But a feller brought up on slav'ry doctrine ort to stay in the South; he hain't no business to come into this part o' the country. Course we ain't all abolitionists 'round here, but purty near it. Ther's only a sprinklin' o' the other stripe; an' they don't cheep out much, I tell *you*. 'Twouldn't be good manners fer 'em to do it, you understand. If I was you, my young feller, I wouldn't stop 'round here any too long; somebody might let it git out that you're a kind of a slave-hunter. Then the music 'ld begin; an' you'd be better off in hell, fer the same length o' time."

Chatham burst out laughing—such a care-free, merry laugh, we could not keep from smiling in sympathy.

"Kirk," he cried, "you grew dramatic; you reached a climax. And you looked as fierce as a bantam rooster; you did, indeed."

Again his peals of hearty laughter rang through the old house; and all of us laughed in unison.

At last our guest curbed his risibilities, and remarked soberly:

"There has been a good deal of truth spoken here to-night on both sides; but you gentlemen have been so free with your questions that I desire to propound a few. Either or both of you may answer."

"Drive on y'r hosses," Bill grinned. "Guess me an' Dave'll manage to keep from under y'r wagon-

wheels. Turn about's fair play. We've had our chance; an' now it's yours."

"Well," Vance proceeded, "both of you confess to being abolitionists, do you?"

"Course we do—proud to do it," Bill answered promptly.

"And, if you had the power, you would free every slave in the country?"

"You bet we would!" was the vehement ejaculation.

"Then what?"

"Huh?" Bill inquired, perplexedly rubbing his chin.

"What would you do then? What would happen then?"

"Dave, I guess you may answer that one," Kirk grunted, dropping his eyes and shaking his head.

"What would we do when we had freed the negro?" David said slowly and thoughtfully. "First, we would make a citizen of him—give him the full rights to enjoy his freedom; and, next, we would take steps to educate him."

"That's it—that's what we'd do!" Bill interjected triumphantly, slapping his thigh. "That's what we'd do with ev'ry last devil of 'em—even if they was so black charcoal 'ld make a white mark on their hides!"

"You would free the slaves and make citizens of them before you had educated them, eh?" Vance remarked, a slight sneer curling his lip.

"Course we would. Why not, I'd like to know?"

"Then what would happen?"

"Nothin'."

"Yes, something would happen, inevitably. First, war between the North and the South, with all the attendant suffering and horror of a great civil conflict. Then, if the North should conquer, a struggle in the South for political supremacy between the two races—anarchy."

"Oh, pshaw!" Bill snorted angrily, contemptuously spitting at the andirons. "I don't b'lieve nothin' o' the kind. Free the niggers—an' they'll *be* free. That's all ther' is to it. They'd go to work fer the'r selves, 'stid o' fer the'r masters—that's the only differ'nce."

"What do you say?" Vance appealed to David.

The old man roused himself as from a doze, and, gazing abstractedly into the depths of the dying fire, uttered these words of prophecy:

"You may be right, my young friend; in fact, I'm of the opinion you *are* right. It's a fearful thing to contemplate. But slavery must be wiped out, and it *will* be wiped out. It has grown domineering and aggressive, and the day of its death is not far off. I shudder when I think of what horrors may attend its deathbed struggles—may follow in its funeral train; yet every waking hour I pray God to hasten the inevitable."

Following David's solemn and impressive speech a silence fell upon us that lasted several seconds. Then the old abolitionist stiffly arose, shook himself and remarked:

"It's two o'clock and honest men ought to be abed. Where am I to sleep, Bill?"

“You’ll ’ave to bunk with me an’ John, in the attic,” was the short reply, sleepily mumbled. “Last come, poorest served.”

The fading firebeams lighted Vance and me up the stairs as we returned to our beds.

CHAPTER V

I THINK I should have slept until noon that day had not my father come and routed me out at daylight.

"Get up," he commanded in a throaty, ill-humored voice, with a sweep denuding me of covers. "It's daylight; crawl out."

His eyes were red; his features soggy. His breath betrayed the fact that he had made an early morning visit to the black jug he kept in the granary.

I sat upon the edge of the bed, dangling my bare legs and yawning, as he slouched toward the stairway. There he paused and remarked:

"Breakfast's purty near ready. Don't be goin' back to sleep, now; 'r I *may* come up with a sprout."

I was not alarmed at his covert threat; he had never struck me a blow, and I had no fear that he would do so now. But I was a little surprised that he had come to call me. That task had always been Ruth's or Bill's.

As I sat rubbing my eyes and lazily gaping and stretching, I became aware that Chatham's bed was empty. So I hurriedly slid into my garments, caught up my hard and wrinkled cowhide boots, and nimbly scampered down the creaking stairs.

Vance sat by the fire, alone. His clothes were free from the stains of mud and water; and his high riding-boots were shiny with the coat of tallow-and-

beeswax he had given them. A tin vessel containing the mixture was upon the hearth at his feet.

"Good-morning, Tom," was his breezy greeting, given with a bright smile.

"Good-morning," I responded moodily, seating myself and gazing ruefully at my water-hardened boots.

Then I said, with the directness of youth: "Are you going to leave this morning?"

"I must—yes," he answered thoughtfully, rubbing one hand over the other.

I began to struggle with my refractory footwear, pulling, tugging, and grunting—and all the while doing some deep thinking. I did not desire Vance to leave; but I felt that he ought to go—that it would be better for all concerned. And what was there to induce him to stay? Nothing—absolutely nothing. Yet I realized that with his departure something would go out of my life—an indefinable something that had but recently come into it, and that I was loath to lose.

He roused me by saying: "Tom, you'll never get those boots on in that condition. You'd better grease them."

I daintily dipped my hand into the warm tallow-and-beeswax and awkwardly essayed the task he had set me—smearing the oleaginous mixture indiscriminately over my boots and clothing, and allowing it to drip through my fingers upon the hearth.

"Here—here!" Vance laughed. "That won't do, Tom. Wake up; you're asleep. Look at your trousers! Let me do it—hand over the stuff."

I demurred, but yielded to his stronger will; and sat and watched him, my greasy digits held stiffly apart.

"Let me pull them on you," he said, when his deft manipulations had rendered the iron-like leather soft and pliable. "Get between my knees."

The right boot went on easily; but the left stuck—and obstinately refused to budge. Vance gave a mighty surge, and a broken strap dangling from his fingers was the result.

"Put your foot on the round of this chair," he panted, pulling one toward me.

I obeyed. Another straining effort—and the contrary boot went on so suddenly that we lost our equilibrium and crashed over in a heap upon the floor.

A peal of silvery laughter greeted our mishap. As we hastily scrambled to our feet, Ruth—who had been peeping in at the door—entered the room and, blushing and dimpling, said apologetically:

"I couldn't keep from laughing, Mr. Chatham; you looked so—so funny going over backward."—And another ebullition of mirth threatened.—"But you'll excuse me, I know; I'm nothing but a giddy, giggling girl. I hope you're not hurt."

Flushed of face and perspiring, Vance stood before her like an overgrown yokel facing a petite school-mistress.

"No apology is necessary, Miss Gaston," he murmured confusedly, brushing the dust from his elbows and grinning sheepishly. "I'd have laughed myself, if the breath hadn't been knocked out of me. But I'm not at all hurt—in mind or body."

Just then Ruth noticed the condition of my hands and clothing, and remarked: "Tom, if you had put more of the grease on your boots and less on your clothes, you'd have got along better."

"I didn't grease 'em," I snickered; "Vance done it."

She flushed to the roots of her hair with shame and anger. How beautiful—how queenly she looked! Chatham's eyes opened wide as he stood observing her; and his countenance beamed the admiration he felt.

Petulantly stamping her foot, she cried: "Tom Gaston! Of all boys you're most provoking! The idea of you asking Mr. Chatham to grease your boots—and of calling him by his Christian name!"

"I didn't ask him to grease my boots," I pouted; "he just done it."

"That's true, Miss Gaston," Vance volunteered, his musical voice vibrant with feeling. "If anyone deserves blame, I'm the culprit. I insisted on greasing his boots and on helping him on with them. As to the other little matter, he and I are comrades—Tom and Vance, you understand."

His tones were grave; but his lips were twitching mischievously. Ruth smiled—then, laughed outright. Their eyes met; and hers dropped.

"I came to call you to breakfast," was all the reply she made as she turned and left the room.

Shrewd and cunning rascal! How did he know that to come to my rescue, to clear me from blame, was to win her favor—that my freckled face was a signboard along the road to her heart?

My father, Ryal and Kirk came in from the

stables, and we went to breakfast. David said grace, and it was such a prolonged and deliberate proceeding that I feared the biscuits would grow cold—and was so unduly exercised that I could hardly refrain from calling the old man's attention to the dreadful prospect. My father was glum throughout the meal; but the others chatted pleasantly.

I was the last to leave the table. Through the back window of the kitchen I caught sight of a cloud of blue smoke billowing and swirling, so I sallied forth to investigate. Perched totteringly upon three large stones was a huge iron kettle, beneath which a fire was crackling merrily, and the quaintest, most grotesque female figure ever encountered was bending over the great vessel.

It was Granny Watson, who lived a mile or so back on the hills, near the frame schoolhouse, and who had come down to help with the soap-making. Her skirts were short—ridiculously short; her shoes, heavy and big. And her blue-stockinged ankles, thus revealed, were of pipestem slenderness. From beneath a frayed and greasy hood of quilted brown satin strayed wisps of coarse iron-gray hair. Her face was wrinkled, her mouth toothless, her nose long and hooked. She had the quick, jerky motions of a lean robin, and, when she stopped for observation, she threw up her head after the manner of the bird.

I stole up behind her, and, making a mouthpiece of my hands, shouted:

“Good-morning, Granny.”

“Hey?” she piped shrilly, turning toward me, her skinny hand to her ear.

I repeated my salutation in as loud a voice as I could command.

"W'y, how d' you do, Tom?" she squeaked, removing her long-stemmed clay pipe from her toothless gums and grinning. "Did you jest git up, you lazy good-fer-nothin'?"—playfully chucking me under the chin. "Tom, I want you to do somethin' fer me—that's a good boy. The lye's run off an' the grease's all ready, but I hain't got no sassyfras stick to stir the stuff with. You run up on the hill-side an' cut me one, that's a laddie! Can't make good soap without a sassyfras stick to stir it with. Will you git one fer me, Tom, eh?"

And again her brown and skinny hand went to her ear; but I nodded in reply.

Bill Kirk was chopping at a near-by woodpile, the bright chips flying in all directions. Now he stopped and said:

"Here's my knife, Tom; it's bigger an' sharper 'n yours. But you be mighty keerful you don't nick it. An' say! If you don't find a sassyfras stick handy, cut a hick'ry. It'll do jest as well."

The last sentence he uttered with a sly wink of his solitary eye.

"What'd he say?" Granny inquired.

"Said that a hickory stick would do just as well as a sassafras," I answered, laughing.

"Smarty!" she squealed, mouthing at him. "Heap you know 'bout makin' soap! I've made many a kittleful 'fore you was dreamp' of, Bill Kirk."

"Made it in a certain sign o' the moon, too, didn't you, Granny?" he bellowed.

"No, I didn't; I made it in a kittle," she retorted, stooping to replenish the fire.

I went for the magic wand. On my return the old dame remarked:

"That's a good boy, Tom! I'll dance at y'r weddin' fer this."

I looked upon her wizened features and mummified form, and my face reflected my disbelief of her assertion.

"You think I'm too old, an' won't live that long?" she cackled, revealing her toothless, shrunken gums. "W'y, boy, I'm only eighty-three, an' as spry as a cricket. I'm good fer a hunderd!"

She was right, too.

"I know now what made you so moony last night," Bill whispered as I returned his knife to him; "Marsh Colby was out behind the granary, holdin' a conflagration with y'r daddy, an' you run onto 'em, an' listened to 'em."

"How—how do you know?" I stammered.

"Saw where Marsh's hoss stood," was the convincing assertion. "A bar shoe makes an odd track; an' Marsh's tacky wears a bar shoe. No use o' shakin' y'r head; you can't fool *me*, youngster. They was plottin' what they'd do to the Kaintuckian if he staid 'round here with his hoss; an' you got skeered. I knowed it soon's you come back to the house. Then, you wasn't hungry fer cider an' apples, w'en you was so eager to go to the cellar with Ruth—not much! You was jest itchin' to tell her what you'd learnt—that was all. Ain't I right, hey?"

"Ruth said not to tell, and——" I began.

"Don't do it, then!" he interrupted sternly. "Mind what Ruth says. An' I don't need to hear you say nothin'; I know enough as it is. Ruth didn't mean me w'en she said not to tell nobody, though; me an' her's had many a talk 'bout—'bout things. Butsay!"—suddenly bending close to me and blowing his tobacco-scented breath in my face—"Don't you want to go out to Bailey's sale to-day with y'r pap? The young Kaintuckian an' Ryal's goin' to ride out that way, too. You'll 'ave a heap o' fun; an' you *might* pick up somethin', if you tried hard—eh?"

"Do you think father'll *let* me go, Bill?" I asked eagerly.

"Wouldn't wonder; you'd better go an' see. I think they're saddlin' the'r critters right now. But, if you *do* go, be keerful, Tom. Cats ain't alluz asleep w'en the'r eyes is shut. Understand?"

I nodded vigorously, and hurried away upon my mission. But as I passed the simmering soap-kettle Granny Watson stretched forth a skinny claw and detained me.

"Let me go!" I cried sharply. "Let me go—I'm in a hurry!"

"Listen!" she croaked in a hoarse, rasping voice wholly unlike her usual piercing treble tones.

I looked up into her wrinkled face bent close to my own, and started back in affright. Her leathery features were working; an insane light was in the inky depths of her sunken black eyes.

Holding me fast, she went on breathlessly:



“Let me go — I’m in a hurry.”

"You're a good boy, Tom—a good boy! But let me warn you. Look out—look out fer Marsh Colby and Shep Dickson! Oh, ther's goin' to be war; an' ther's goin' to be trouble in this fam'ly! The signs is all fer war. The moon an' stars p'int to war! An' nearly all the babies bein' born is boy babies; an' *that* means war. But ther's goin' to be trouble, too—trouble in this fam'ly! Look at that fire—look at it! The flame's black; an' the smoke tangles an' snarls. Trouble—trouble! Oh! you think I'm cracked!"—Evidently my face revealed my thoughts.—"But I know what I'm doin' an' sayin'. Listen! You an' Bill Kirk was talkin' secrets jest now. I didn't hear a word; but I know you *was*. An' I know more—lots more! There was plottin' an' schemin' last night; an' you heerd it. I saw an' heerd it all, in a dream. An' the young man won't go away; an' ther'll be trouble—trouble! Oh, ther's been wicked carryin's-on! An' ther'll be——"

I could stand no more. Frantic with superstitious dread and fear, I jerked loose from her clawlike clutch and dashed around the corner of the house. Once out of her sight, I paused to recover my equanimity and compose my features.

"She must be a witch!" I thought; and I shuddered.

But a feeling that I ought to accompany my father to Bailey's sale was strong upon me; and fear that he might be gone already caused me to hurry on my way toward the stables, a prey to vague apprehensions.

I found the three men mounted and ready to set

out. Ruth was leaning over the low front gate; and Chatham had ridden close to the fence, and was talking to her.

"Ah, here's Tom," he smiled, as I put in an appearance. "I was wondering why you didn't come to bid me good-by. Give me a wag of your paw, Tom."

He bent in the saddle and shook my hand. Then, as I stepped aside, I heard him say to Ruth—his musical voice soft with emotion: "Good-by, Miss Gaston. I've spent a pleasant twelve hours beneath your hospitable roof; and, if I ever pass this way again,—and I hope I may,—I'll surely stop to see you."

It may have been my imagination, but I thought he emphasized the pronoun whose beautiful, breathing antecedent stood so near him.

"Good-by," he repeated, extending his hand.

"Good-by," she returned softly, her eyes full upon his face.

Then their hands met—and separated; and he spurred into the middle of the road, thus announcing his readiness to depart.

"Can't I go to the sale with you, father?" I asked timidly, sidling up to his prancing horse.

"No, I guess not,"—with a decided shake of the head.—"What d'you want to go fer?"

"Just for fun—just to see things," I faltered.

"Guess you'd better stay to home; the women folks'll need y'r help."

Ruth made intercession by saying: "Let him go; he'll hinder us more than he'll help us."

But she gave me a meaningful smile, and I grinned over my shoulder at her, gratitude in my heart.

"Bess don't like to carry double very well," my father still feebly objected.

"I can walk," I said sturdily.

"Nonsense!" he muttered. "It's six 'r seven miles."

"Go to the stable and get you a horse, Tom," David suggested, fondly stroking the mane of his pot-bellied roan. "There's several standing idle in their stalls, eating their heads off."

"They've all been workin' hard, an' need rest," my father quickly interposed. "I s'pose he can go, though. Climb up here."

"Let him ride behind me, as far as I go on your road," Vance proposed, flinging a foot out of the stirrup. "Here, Tom—give me your hand."

I eagerly ran forward to accept his offer. Using his dangling foot as a step, I mounted to a seat behind his saddle, and placed my arms around his waist.

Then we set out, my father in the lead. Ruth called a good-by to us, as we turned the corner beyond the cider-press; and Vance and I waved our hands in reply.

The sun shone bright; a clean, woodsy odor was in the crisp, clear air. The muddy highway, following the creek valley, was erratic in its course—here clinging timidly to the jutting base of a hill, and there boldly invading the rocky bed of the stream; and its windings and turnings afforded a never-ending panorama of picturesque views.

Chatham and Ryal rode side by side—where the road permitted—and talked on various subjects; but neither reverted to the question of slavery. My father rode with his chin upon his breast, and had not a word to say. Whether he was lost in thought, or was stupid from drink, I could not tell. As for myself, I was free from my troubles and perplexities, for the time; and was content to ride on and on, drinking in the delights of the morning and the scene.

A red-headed wood-pecker, drumming industriously upon the trunk of a dead tree, evoked from me a smile; and a gray squirrel with a nut in his mouth, scampering along the top rail of a near-by fence, caused me to shout in glee. Such is the exhilaration—the elasticity of the urchin of twelve years.

When we were a mile and a half from home Vance pointed to a small frame building on the bleak summit of a hilltop to the right of the road, and inquired what it was.

“It’s the schoolhouse,” I made answer.

“How many months’ school do you have a year?” was his next question.

“Four, or five months in winter; none in summer,” I informed him.

“An’ that’s more ’n enough,” my father mumbled, as though to himself. “Folks that has to dig fer a livin’ hain’t no time to dig fer learnin’. It don’t help ’em none, anyhow; jest makes fools of ’em. Let a feller git crazy on book-learnin’ an’ he ain’t no ’count fer nothin’.”

Those were the first words he had uttered since leaving his own gate.

Unheeding the spleenful irruption against education, Vance pursued:

"When does your school open, Tom—or has it opened?"

"In a week or so, if they can get a teacher," I replied. "The one they had hired took sick and isn't expected to get well."

"Oh!"—Then after a moment's silence:—"Who are the—the directors, I believe you call them?"

I told him.

We rode on a distance, none of us speaking. At last my father half turned in the saddle and said:

"Are you a schoolmaster, Mr. Chatham?"

"I've never taught," Vance answered carelessly; "but I think I could."

There was a startled look of inquiry in John Gaston's porcine eyes as he fired over his shoulder:

"You don't think o' tryin' it, of course?"

"Why not?" was the quick rejoinder.

"Not *here?*"—in a voice of blank dismay.

"As well here as elsewhere. I've no certificate, but I presume I could get one. Do you think the directors would hire me, Mr. Gaston?"

My father turned away his head, muttering to the horn of his saddle: "Maybe they would an' maybe they wouldn't. I don't know. But I *do* know you don't want the job. It's a mighty hard school to handle; the big boys has run out 'bout ev'ry teacher that's tried it. Then it's only twenty-five dollars a month, an' board y'rself an' make y'r own fires."

"It's twenty-five dollars a month better than no job," Vance laughed.

My father muttered something I could not catch, and said no more.

"Where do the directors live, Tom?" Vance asked in a whisper, bending toward me.

I told him.

"Will any of them be at the sale?"

"All of them, more than likely," I answered eagerly.

Like an effulgent light his interest and purpose flashed upon me; and an entrancing hope, an ecstatic joy, sprang up in my heart. Vance meant to stay and teach our school! I wanted to fly on the wings of the wind and promulgate the good tidings to the farthest corners of the district, to cry aloud the news from every hilltop, to pluck the sleeve of every ragged backwoods schoolmate and pour the sweet, consolatory message into his ear! For so the prospect seemed to me. Then, of a sudden, I thought of what might happen—of what *would* happen, probably—should Vance remain in the neighborhood, and my airy castle fell to earth. I disliked to have him leave; I feared to have him stay. Sure never was luckless urchin in a worse quandary!

One incident of that morning ride—that has little to do with my tale—intrudes itself upon my mind now, and I may as well record it, and have done with it.

Just as we were at the place where the road left the creek valley—it follows the stream a half mile farther now—bent sharply to the left and ascended the hill upon which stood the Coon tavern, we came

upon a wagon and team stuck fast in a mudhole. Waxy, red mud packed the spaces among the spokes of the wheels, and the lank and weary horses could not budge the stalled vehicle. The driver, a rough-looking man of middle age and a stranger to me, sat upon the pile of filled sacks with which the wagon was loaded.

"Huh!" my father ejaculated, as we came in sight of the mired conveyance, turning his face toward Ryal.

"Well, I declare!" the latter exclaimed in turn.

Then they exchanged significant glances, the meaning of which I could not fathom.

On inquiry, the stranger stated that he was on his way to Eagle dam, with a load of grain. Seemingly his replies were straightforward and truthful; at any rate, he appeared so ingenuous, so dull-minded, as to be incapable of practicing shrewd deception. The conclusion of the affair was that my three companions dismounted, procured poles and rails, pried the wagon out of the rut, and helped to roll it on to firm ground.

The teamster thanked them, clucked to his fagged team, and slowly drove away.

Vance's shiny boots and fine clothing were besmeared with mud; and he was panting from his exertions as he remounted to the saddle. My father looked at him, noted his sorry plight, and burst out laughing. David gave a look, stared blankly at my father for a moment, and then suddenly joined in his merriment. And the two continued to chuckle and gurgle and explode all the way up the hill—

much to my embarrassment and Vance's bewilderment. When we asked them to explain, they simply shook their heads, exchanged glances—and laughed the more. However, Vance did not take their rude behavior amiss, but smiled serenely—perhaps a little superiorly, as he guided Kaintuck up the steep and rough ascent. Such tolerance on his part I thought very commendable; and I admired him the more.

Not until years afterward did Vance and I learn the secret of our companions' hilarity on that occasion. David it was who finally told us—David grown palsied and feeble with age. And this was the cause of their laughter: The simple-minded, stupid-looking teamster whom we encountered that morning was, in reality, one of the shrewdest and boldest Quaker abolitionists that ever aided a black man in his flight toward Canada. And at that very time he was engaged in an enterprise of the kind. What appeared to be bags of grain, in his wagon, were merely bags of chaff; and under them reposed a half-dozen ebony fugitives. He was boldly traveling by daylight, to allay suspicion. David and my father recognized him, and realized at once what was the nature of his load; yet, as was the habit of the brotherhood, they gave no sign of recognition. But to see Chatham—a Kentucky aristocrat, and an avowed slavery-sympathizer—exerting his full strength, and soiling his hands and clothing, in the service of a lot of fugitive negroes, excited the risibilities of both to the explosive point. Rank abolitionists, as both were, the humor of the situation irresistibly appealed to their sense of the ridiculous.

What might have occurred had Vance known at the time what he afterward learned, is problematical. I have always been thankful that he did not know.

On reaching the Coon tavern at the summit of the hill—a barn-like, ramshackle frame building standing at the fork of the road and flanked by a blacksmith shop on the one hand and by a country store on the other—my father reined in and remarked: “Mr. Chatham, the right hand road’s the one fer you to take, if you want to go through toward Columbus. Foller the main road to Curateville, an’ then strike off to the right. It’s a little longer road ’n I could pi’nt out; but you’ll make better time over it.”

“You turn to the left here?” Vance queried.

“We go to the left—yes.”

“Can’t I accompany you to the sale—at Bailey’s, I believe you said—and swing back into the Curateville road farther on?”

My father sat glowering at the speaker for some seconds; then he answered sulkily: “I s’pose you *can*, of course; but I don’t see what in hell you want to *do* it fer!”

“Tut, tut, John!” David cried reprovingly. “Why will you use such rough language!”

“Perhaps I enjoy your genial company, Mr. Gaston,” Vance replied to my father’s outburst, his eyes sparkling. “At any rate, I think I’ll ride on to the sale with you. How far is it from here to Bailey’s place?”

“Three ’r four miles,” my father jerked out, his loose features puffing with anger.

"Why, John Gaston!" Ryal exclaimed reproachfully. "It isn't more than half that distance."

My father offered no further objection to Vance's going with us; but, ripping out an oath, and muttering something about "meddlers that can't 'tend to the'r own business," he flounced out of the saddle and made his way toward the tavern, his face spotted with rage. David and Vance looked wonderingly after him, and at each other. He entered the door leading to the tavern barroom. When he emerged a few minutes later, he was clearing his throat and smacking his lips, and the neck of a bottle was protruding from his coat pocket.

It is hardly necessary to state that Vance accompanied us to Bailey's sale, in spite of his manifest lack of welcome—in spite of my father's open discourtesy. To me the young Kentuckian's motive was apparent; he was bent on securing the position of teacher in our school. However, I resolved to fret no more over the matter. What was to be *would* be, I argued; and I did my best to rid my mind of the subject.

On arriving at Bailey's we found quite a crowd already gathered. The barnyard was filled with vehicles and teams; and both sides of the road were lined with tethered saddle-horses. It was a nondescript assembly of backwoods denizens in motley garb—the unwashed and the unredeemed predominating. Women and children, gabbing and giggling, filled the stuffy rooms of the big log house; and men and boys clustered around the doors and in the fence corners, smoking and gassing. A barrel of hard

cider was on tap in the smokehouse—and was making its presence felt.

A half-hour after our arrival the auctioneer put in an appearance. He was a foxy little man with pinched features and sharp nose—a local celebrity, noted for his gift of gab, powers of exaggeration, and keen retorts. He did not dilly-dally, but at once set the ball a-rolling. The farm implements were to be disposed of first; so to the barnyard he led the way, men and boys flocking after him, chaffing and laughing as they went.

Mounting a large box placed against the side of the barn, he vigorously thumped the rostrum with the heavy hickory cudgel he carried, and called for the first article to be offered for sale.

An ancient grain-cradle was placed on the box beside him. Tapping it with his stick, he threw back his head, half closed his eyes, and sang:

“There is never mighty monarch,
Clad in raiment rich an’ fine,
But his life was shaped an’ molded
By a mother’s love divine;
Sure she built his future kingdom,
As his baby locks she curled—
Fer the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world!

“There is never ship o’ commerce,
Sailin’ o’er the vasty main,
But its cargo ’r its ballast
Is the farmer’s golden grain.
Should the farmer cease his labors,
Ev’ry sail would then be furled—
Fer the hand that swings the cradle
Is the hand that feeds the world!”

I have often wondered where he got that song. He was a good singer; his voice, clear and resonant. Shouts and cheers greeted his initial performance. "Go it, Sim! Give us another one, Sim McGovern!" were the cries that arose on all sides.

Hastily rapping them to order, he again tapped the grain-cradle with his cane and shouted:

"How much am I bid fer this cradle? Let me have a bid. Don't stand there growin' fast to the ground, like a passel o' toadstools! Come an' speckylate with me, an' I'll speckylate with you. Wake up! How much am I bid? Twenty-five cents—two dimes and a half—one quarter of a dollar. The man that made that bid ort to be ashamed o' hisself! Twenty-five cents! It wouldn't pay the *jaybird* that planted the *acorn*, that sprouted the *tree*, that grewed the *log*, that furnished the *timber*, that *made* the cradle!"—This he delivered in typical house-that-Jack-built style; and his auditors roared with laughter.—"Twenty-five cents! Who'll make it fifty? Fifty I've got; who'll make it seventy-five? Seventy-five I've got; who'll make it a dollar? One dollar I'd like; one dollar I desire; one dollar I want; one dollar I *must* have! Who'll have it? Who'll take it? Who'll receive it? Who'll carry it away—at one dollar? I only ask four quarters—one hundred cents—one dollar! I must sell, an' can't dwell! Goin', goin', g—*watch out!* It'll be gone in a minute, if I don't git more money! Seventy-five cents—an' a-goin'! Thank you, my friend. Your head's level—flat on top. One dollar I've got! Who'll make it one-five? One-five! One-ten! One-fifteen

—an' a-goin'! Sing out loud an' clear! Don't be afeared to walk up to the rack an' taste o' the fodder! One dollar an' fifteen cents I'm bid! Are you all done? Ol' Sim McGovern is the crier; an' no by-bidder'll be the buyer! One dollar an' fifteen cents—once; one dollar an' fifteen cents—twice; one dollar an' fifteen cents—three times! An' sold to Amos Fisher, fer one dollar an' fifteen cents. He's a huxter—an' needs it in his business. Sold ag'in, an' got the tin, an' a little box to put it in! Pass up some-thin' else!"

And thus he went on, hour after hour. I stood looking up at him, in open-mouthed admiration and wonder, until my legs grew numb and the muscles of my neck seemed paralyzed. How keenly he scanned the sea of faces before him; how quickly he caught and interpreted a word or a wink—a nudge or a nod! How alert and animated he was; and, above all, what a cataract of words he poured forth! He sang songs, grave and gay; he indulged in quips and pranks. He was fool and philosopher, poet and preacher; and all to the infinite delight of his audience. Matchless Sim McGovern!

But at last I—even I!—grew tired of his everlasting singsong, and turned away and left him.

First, I stretched my cramped and aching legs by taking a few turns around the barnyard. Then I joined a crowd of other boys who were playing ball in the field across the road. But the game ended in a row—in which I felt it incumbent upon me to take part, and from which I emerged wearing a black

badge of courage, in shape of a bruised eye—and I returned to the barnyard.

Sim McGovern was still gesticulating and vociferating; but, for some reason, I did not care to listen to him. My injured eye was paining me, and I was just a little lonesome—just a little homesick. I almost wished I were at home, with Ruth. I looked around for my companions of the morning. They were not in sight. But, hitched near our own horses, in one corner of the inclosure, was Marsh Colby's iron-gray; and I shrewdly guessed that he and my father were together somewhere.

Having nothing better to do, I sauntered toward the orchard back of the barn, the thought in my mind that I might find a few late apples still clinging to leafless trees. I had a hazy recollection that I had heard Bill Kirk say that frozen apple was good for a "black eye," and I thought that the proper way to use the remedy was to eat it, of course.

Near the bars leading from the barnyard to the orchard I came upon Chatham and Ryal, in earnest conversation with the three directors of our school. Vance nodded and beckoned to me as I passed; but, all at once, I wanted to be alone, and I gave no heed to his hail.

I was standing under a tree munching a half-rotten apple and thinking deeply, when a pair of palms were placed over my ears and my chin was suddenly tilted toward the sky. Vance stood smiling down into my face.

"Who blacked your eye, Tom?" he asked, whirling me around and releasing me.

"A fellow called Jim Grimes," I answered, feelingly rubbing my injured optic.

"Is he bigger than you?"

"Yes."

"Did he lick you?"

"No, he didn't!"—indignantly.

"He didn't? I'm glad to hear that. Well, did you lick him?"

"Yes, I did."

"Good!" he laughed. "I'm still more pleased. But what was the cause of your quarrel, Tom?"

"A lot of us boys were playing ball and got into a dispute. He commenced to pick on the smallest boy in the crowd, and I tried to make him quit. Then he called me bad names, and struck me."

"And that blow blacked your eye?"

"Yes."

"You shouldn't have let him hit you."

"I couldn't help it; he struck me too quick."

"Well, Tom," he said earnestly, "that's the blow you must be able to ward off—the quick and unexpected one. I'll take it upon myself to teach you how to defend yourself."

"You will?" I cried joyfully. "When?"

"At odd times during the winter. I'm going to teach your school. I'll give you your first lesson in the manly art right now—in shape of a little advice. Never get into a fight as long as you can honorably avoid it; but once into it, leave an everlasting remembrance of it with your antagonist—that he has made your acquaintance. A man well whipped is whipped forever; you don't have to do the job over

every few days. Are you glad I'm going to teach your school, Tom?"

"Yes, I—I guess so," I said hesitatingly.

"Well, you don't show it," he remarked, smiling.

Then he stood looking down at me, in silence, for some seconds, biting off pieces of a timothy straw he held in his hand. At last he remarked musingly:

"I think I know what ails you, though. You're afraid my pro-slavery sentiments will get me into trouble. Is that it?"

I shook my head.

"You understand what I mean, Tom?"

I nodded.

"No? What then?"

I made no reply.

"Your father doesn't like me, for some reason. Is that it?"

He bent closer and looked me straight in the eyes; and I answered with an almost imperceptible nod.

"That matters little," he laughed, clapping me on the shoulder. "*You* like me; that's of more importance. I can't imagine, however, why your father dislikes me. Why, he hardly knows my face. I'm going to board with him, though—if he'll take me in. Do you think he will, Tom?"

"I don't know," I replied, staring stolidly.

My antagonistic desires and emotions had rendered me apathetic.

"Tom, you're in the dumps!" he cried, giving me a shake. "You're holding something back, too. But I don't want you to tell me; I'll find out for myself."

If the devil should hide a thing from me, one of his imps would play traitor and reveal it."

Then, with extreme suddenness: "Do you see that apple in the top of yon tree? Watch me bring it down."

He had not replaced his revolver in the holster of his saddle. Now he drew it from a pocket in the breast of his coat, took quick aim, and fired. The apple came tumbling to the ground. He had shot off the twig that held it.

Instantly my apathy was gone. I ran and picked up the fallen fruit, and was volubly expressing my admiration for his marksmanship, when a slight noise behind us caused me to turn around. There—not thirty feet away—stood Marsh Colby and my father, closely observing us!

CHAPTER VI

How long had the two scowling men been there? How much had they heard? Thought of the probable answers to these questions set me all a-tremble. But Chatham did not appear at all perturbed; and he remarked carelessly:

"I was just knocking down an apple for Tom, Mr. Gaston—and incidentally giving him an exhibition of my marksmanship. Did you notice the shot I made?"

There was a degree of admiration—but no cordiality—in my father's voice and demeanor as he replied:

"It was a purty good shot—as good as most people could make with a rifle."

Then, after a momentary pause—and with a forced, mirthless smile, he added: "It wouldn't be healthy fer a feller to stand up before you, at twenty paces."

"Hardly," Vance answered soberly. "Nor at twice the distance."

"You must 'ave had to practice a good 'eal to learn to shoot like that," my father pursued.

The interest he evinced surprised me. For, as a rule, he gave little attention to such things—to anything, in fact, except stock-dealing and money-getting.

"Yes," Vance replied coolly, "quite a deal. But

it's a part of a gentleman's education in Kentucky, you know."

"Huh!" my father snorted contemptuously; and was silent.

Marsh Colby had not opened his mouth or stirred from his tracks. All the while he had stood slapping his bootleg with his riding-whip and glowering darkly. Now he strode off a few paces, and threw his great form upon the damp sod. His eyes were preternaturally bright; his sluggish features were puffy and red. To me, it was evident that he had been holding close communion with Frank Bailey's cider barrel or John Gaston's whisky bottle—or both.

My father stood staring into vacancy, and uneasily and clumsily shuffling his feet for some little time. At last he remarked tentatively:

"I reckon you'll be thinkin' 'bout r'sumin' y'r journey, purty soon, Mr. Chatham, seein' that the day's wearin' on?"

"The fact is, Mr. Gaston," Vance said slowly—like one carefully selecting and weighing each word, "that I'm not going to pursue my journey farther at present. As you undoubtedly heard me say to Tom, a few minutes ago, the directors of your school have hired me to teach a four-months' term."

And he gave my father a searching look, to note the effect of his candid statement.

"Y-e-s, I heard you say somethin' o' the kind, jest as I come up," my father muttered in reply—his eyes dropping before Vance's steady gaze; "but I didn't think much 'bout it—didn't s'pose you meant

it. But you're in earnest, are you—goin' to stop here an' teach our school, eh? "

"Yes."

"Don't see what you want to do it fer."

"For twenty-five dollars a month,"—smiling.

"I understand *that* well enough"—with an irritable toss of the head—"but it seems to me a young feller like you ort to be able to find somethin' better 'n teachin' a country school—in some city, fer instance."

"Yes," Vance admitted, "it would seem so. I did think of going on to Columbus."

"That's the very thing fer you to do," my father ventured, with undue eagerness. "Why don't you do it? What's made you change y'r mind? "

"Getting the school has caused me to change my mind, Mr. Gaston. Here I'm sure of employment at fair wages for four months. There I might——"

"Nothin' else has caused you to change y'r mind? "

"N-o. Why? "

"Nothin'; I was jest a-wonderin'—that's all. Well, you know y'r own business, an' can do as you like."

"Of course."

"But, if I was you, I wouldn't stay 'round here."

"Why? "

"'Cause. That's why."

"Give me your reason, Mr. Gaston."

"Well, if you *must* know, Dave Ryal an' Bill Kirk tells me you're a b'liever in slav'ry. I don't blame you fer that, mind you, seein' you come from Ken-

tucky; but there's a good many abolitionists in these parts, an' you're liable to git into trouble. You won't be able to teach the school through; I'd bet on it."

"I've no fear on that score, Mr. Gaston," Vance said quietly, but firmly. "And I'd like to board with you. What do you say?"

"Don't know; can't say till I've talked with the women folks," my father replied quickly, casting an apprehensive glance at the recumbent form of Colby.

"You'll let me stay a few days at least, won't you—until I can find another place?"

My father had a short struggle with his native hospitality, met with defeat, and said slowly and reluctantly: "Yes, I s'pose so."

"All right. I'll ride back home with you, when you're ready to start."

Vance sauntered off toward the barnyard. My father, absent-mindedly digging his heel into the soft sod, stood and watched his retreating form. The younger man passed through the bars and disappeared; but still the older stood staring after him.

"Father," I said timidly, "I'm hungry."

My voice recalled him to a sense of his surroundings.

"Well, I hain't got nothin' fer you to eat," he grumbled; "but there's a woman sellin' pies an' cakes an' things out to the house. Here's a dime; go an' buy what you want."

I eagerly seized the coin, and scampered away as fast as my nimble legs could carry me.

And, all the while, Marsh Colby had not uttered a word, nor moved from his position.

I found the barnyard deserted. Farm implements and live stock had been disposed of; and the crowd had adjourned to the house, where the sale of household goods was in progress.

Just as I turned the corner of the barn and came in sight of the gateway leading to the road, a horseman—mounted upon a rangy black racker—rode into the inclosure and flung himself from the saddle. It was Shep Dickson. He was a tall, muscular, long-limbed man of fifty years, or thereabout, with bowed legs and sagged shoulders; and he walked with an awkward straddle. His countenance was swarthy and ill-favored; his bushy eyebrows, wavy hair and long, matted beard, reaching to his waist, were as black as night. Hooked nose and piercing black eyes stamped him as a bird of prey; and his whole appearance was indicative of indomitable grit, forcefulness and endurance. I knew him as a bold, soulless, horsy scoundrel. His clothes were of typical backwoods pattern and material—slouch hat, linsey-woolsey coat and trousers, the latter stuffed into the tops of coarse cowhide boots, and leather belt.

I stopped to observe him. He hung the bridle-rein over his arm, cocked his head on one side, pursed his lips in a silent whistle, and took an inventory of the animals hitched about the barnyard and along the roadside fences.

“Jim Johnson’s sor’l—an’ Ed Buckley’s bay,” I heard him mutter to himself. “Yes, an’ ther’s Marsh Colby’s iron-gray, an’ John Gaston’s Bess—an’ even Dave Ryal’s ol’ roan.”

But suddenly he started back, exclaiming aloud: "Good God! An' there's Kaintuck—as sure's I'm a livin' sinner!"

Then he glanced fearfully around, to note if anyone had overheard him; and his keen eyes rested upon me. The look he gave me was calculated to strike terror to my soul; and it did so. I leaned against the side of the barn for support, and drew myself into the smallest mass possible. I felt that the earth was about to open and swallow me—and wished that it would!

"What're you doin' here, boy?" Shep demanded fiercely, dropping the bridle-rein and striding up to me.

"I—I don't know," I gasped, attempting to shrink into nothingness.

He hovered over me, his hands clenched, his long arms swinging, his features working.

"What're you doin'?" he repeated menacingly, snarling like an angry dog. "Out with it!"

"Nothing!" I breathed in a faint whisper. "I was on my way to the house."

"You was sneakin' 'round tryin' to poke y'r nose into other people's business, more likely," he growled, stepping back and surveying me from head to foot. "Let me give you a little good advice. Don't you never try nothin' o' that kind on me! D'you understand?"

"Y-yes, sir," I whispered falteringly.

"All right; you can go, then. But don't fergit what I've said!"

Greatly relieved, I was moving toward the house,

when he called sharply: "Hold on a minute, youngster! Ain't you John Gaston's boy?"

"Yes, sir," I answered, but still drawing away from him.

"Well, hold on—wait!"

The impulse was strong upon me to take to my heels, but I overcame it and waited for him to come up with me.

"W'y, Tom, I didn't know you!" he laughed, revealing his tobacco-stained teeth. "You're all right—you are. I wouldn't hurt n'r scare you fer anything. I thought you was one o' them sneakin' Freely boys, hidin' 'round to steal whips 'r hitchin'-straps. Yes, I did."

I nodded tremulously—my mouth open; and he went on:

"Yes, you're all right, Tom—a bully good boy!"—And he gave me a slap between the shoulders, that almost knocked me off my feet, and that set me to coughing.—"You *bet*! I've been at your house many a time. You know *me*, Tom, eh?"—I bobbed my head. "Of course! An' I know you. No danger o' *you* meddlin' with things that don't concern you—not a bit. I see y'r daddy's hoss here—an' Marsh Colby's an' Dave Ryal's,"—with a jerk of his thumb indicating the animals.—"Where are they, Tom—eh?"

"Father and Marsh 're out in the orchard," I made reply, edging along the path toward the house.

"Anybody else out there?"

I shook my head.

"All right! I guess I'll go out an' hunt 'em up.

But say! Whose hoss is that hitched in the corner, long with y'r daddy's—that trim-legged ches'nut sor'l?"

"Vance Chatham's."

"Didn't know the hoss; an' don't know the man, I guess," he said, reflectively stroking his long beard as he turned and left me.

His glib lie did not deceive me. I knew he had recognized Kaintuck; and I felt sure—from the slight start he gave at mention of the young Kentuckian—that he recalled the name Chatham.

I tarried long enough to see him hitch his own horse and pass through the bars into the orchard. Then I slowly moved on to the house, my chin sunk upon my breast—thinking deeply.

It was an hour past midday. Sim McGovern stood upon the broad flag step in front of the cabin door, still monotonously droning away; and around him was a packed semi-circle of people.

"Forty-five cents—an' a-goin'!" I heard him say; and I paused momentarily. The spell of his oratory was back upon me; and, hungry as I was, I must listen to him—if but for a moment.

He was selling a wooden churn—a dingy, battered, sour-smelling tub, with a well-worn lid and an upright dasher.

"Forty-five cents—an' a-goin'!" he repeated, with a nod at a sorrowful-looking, lop-sided little man in front of him.

"Fifty cents!" the diminutive individual piped shrilly, attempting to draw himself together and stiffly stand erect.

"Fifty-five!" said a masculine voice within the room back of the auctioneer.

The doorway was crowded and I could not see who the other bidder was, though I stood on tiptoe and made an attempt to do so.

"Fifty-five cents! Fifty-five cents—an' a-goin'!" McGovern called.

"Sixty cents!" the little man screeched frantically, dancing about in excitement.

"Sixty-five!" rumbled the voice within.

And thus it went on. I noticed that certain individuals in the crowd went to the high window—which I could not reach—peeped in, and came away, convulsed with laughter. Then they clapped one another upon the shoulders, prodded one another in the ribs, and bent double with unseemly merriment. I could not understand their actions.

At last the churn was knocked down to the persistent little man at ninety-five cents—twice its value. He was proudly carrying it away—fondly hugged to his breast—when the crowd around the doorway parted suddenly and a tall, angular woman elbowed her way through and fell like an avalanche upon the unfortunate purchaser.

It was his wife. Unwittingly he had been bidding against her; and she showed him no mercy. She knocked the churn from his arms and gave it a kick that sent it rolling. She pulled his hair, scratched his face and sadly disarranged his tattered clothing, and, all the while, she roundly abused him with her vixenish tongue.

When she had made a wreck of him and had ex-

hausted her vocabulary of billingsgate, then—and not till then—did she leave off clawing and berating the cowering, whining wretch and permit him to slink away and hide his shame. Poor, timid, simple fellow! I sincerely pitied him; but his neighbors appeared to enjoy his discomfiture, and hooted and yelled in derisive delight.

His wife returned indoors, cracking her fists and declaring what she would do to him when she got him home.

The needs of my stomach had become imperative, and I hastened around to the kitchen. There I invested my coin in a fat mince pie and a pocketful of sorghum cookies; and, in a sunny corner of the roadside, I sat down and devoured the whole.

Feeling much better—indeed, quite cheerful, for I was a stranger to the qualms of indigestion in those days—I set out on a search for my comrades of the ball field.

They were not to be found, having betaken themselves to the woods in quest of boyish excitement and adventure, and I dejectedly returned toward the house.

On my way I once more found myself in the barnyard, and there I discovered Marsh Colby, Shep Dickson and my father.

They were sitting upon an overturned sled, their backs toward the wall of the barn farthest from the dwelling, whittling and talking; and they did not observe my arrival. I instantly decided to make an effort to overhear what they were saying; and—although the thought of my temerity set my teeth

chattering—I went around to the rear of the structure and stealthily invaded the dusky interior.

Tiptoeing and creeping, I made my way among barrels and implements, and over heaps and hillocks of hay and straw, until I reached a place just behind the trio whose conversation I sought to overhear. I had just snugly ensconced myself—my body covered with fragrant hay, my face glued to a convenient crack in the wall—when a hand was lightly laid upon my shoulder and a voice breathed softly into my ear:

“Sh! Tom, not a word! It’s I—Vance!”

I was startled, of course; and it was with difficulty that I kept from screaming aloud—such was the nervous tension under which I was laboring. But I set my teeth and held my breath; and, twisting my neck, I silently looked into Vance’s eyes. He was smiling—a most winning, devil-may-care smile. His head only was visible; like myself, he had concealed his body beneath the hay. It was plain that we held a purpose in common; and, for some reason, that knowledge reassured me—soothed me.

“Sh!” he repeated, in the faintest whisper. “Listen!”

Again I pressed my face to the rough wall and peered out at the crack between the logs. The three men were in range of vision—in plain view. Shep Dickson was speaking; and, listening intently, I caught these words:

“We ain’t got much cause to be worried ’bout this young feller an’ Kaintuck happenin’ to drift in here, so far’s I can see. It’s jest an accident. He don’t

know nothin'—I'll bet on that; an' he won't find out nothin'. All we've got to do is to lay low an' chaw pokeroot. If we hadn't nothin' more to feel c'n-cerned 'bout, I'd feel first rate. Ol' George Simpson lives twenty miles from here; an' nobody 'round here knows Kaintuck but ourselves. But the thing that bothers *me*, fellers, is this: People's gittin' onto our game. We've got to call a halt; there's no denyin' that. Even a good 'thing can be pushed too far. My excuse, that I go South to help in runnin' off niggers—which is a fact, so far's it goes—is wore threadbare, an' won't hold water. I don't keer to swing from the limb of a tree—I don't; n'r to play checkers with my nose, by peepin' through the bars o' the penitentiary. I've made up my mind to try fer one more haul—a big one; an' then I'm done with this part o' the country. The climate's gittin' entirely too unhealthy fer me."

He paused reflectively; then went on: "What we want to do's this: Let the young feller go on with his school-teachin'; an' let him an' the hoss stay with you, John, till——"

"I'll be damned if they will!" Marsh Colby snorted angrily, springing to his feet.

"What's the matter now, young man?" Shep asked coolly, arising and deliberately brushing the whittlings from his trousers.

"Jest this——" Marsh began in a loud voice.

"Marsh!" my father interrupted in a scared whisper. "Hain't you got a mite o' sense? Somebody'll hear you, maybe. Talk lower!"

"Let the drunken fool blab!" Shep said, with a

short laugh that resembled a snarl. "He'll manage to git all our necks into a halter, if he has *his* way."

Then in a firm undertone: "Now, Marsh Colby, what was you goin' to say?"

"Jest this," Marsh answered sullenly: "That young dandy struck me an' knocked me down. Him an' me can't live in the same neighborhood—that's all. He's got to git up an' dust!"

"Who'll make him do it?" Dickson asked quickly, his black eyes snapping.

"Me!" Marsh growled.

"You? Hell!"—with a sneer that lifted his lip and showed his yellow teeth.—"He's licked you once; an' he'll do it ag'in, if you fool with him. That young chap's double-gear'd lightnin'—r he ain't his daddy's son. You'd better hire the job out to somebody, Marsh."

"I can whip him!" Marsh muttered. "Jest let me git my arms 'round his slim body once, an' I'll——"

"Pooh! You can't whip one side of him, Marsh—you can't touch him. You don't know what you're talkin' 'bout. That chap's a boxer an' wrestler from 'way back."

"I guess I've got pards that'll stand by me," Marsh said stubbornly. "An' he's got to dig out o' here!"

"Who says so?"

"I do!"

"The devil you say!" Shep hissed, stepping up to the young giant and shaking a knotty fist under his nose. "Marshy, my boy, git right down off y'r

high hoss! You can skeer some people with y'r blusterin' an' y'r blowin', but I'll be everlastin'ly damned if you can skeer me! I wasn't brung up in the woods, to be skeered by the hoot of an owl. Now, who's captain o' the gang—you 'r me, hey?"

"You," Colby grunted.

"Well, jest keep that in mind, will you? An' keep a still tongue in y'r head till I git through talkin'. As I said, we'll let the young feller commence his school an' board hisself an' hoss at John's. It's the only safe way; we can keep an eye on 'em that way. Then, w'en I'm ready to run off the bunch I've got picked out—in a few weeks from now—we'll add Kaintuck to it; an' kill two birds with one stone—make sever'l hundred dollars on the hoss, an' git red o' the danger o' havin' him 'round here. After that, Marsh, you can do as you please to the young Kentuckian, an' I won't say a word. If you git into trouble, it won't be my lookout; I'll be gone South, anyhow."

Marsh's heavy features were twitching with ill-contained rage; but he stood stolidly staring at the earth and made no reply. My father, however, got upon his feet and, shutting his knife and returning it to his pocket, remarked quietly:

"I don't like y'r plan, Shep. D'you mean that I'm to take this young feller into my house, feed him an' use him well, an' then—w'en the time comes—help to steal his hoss from my own stable?"

"I've a notion that you've put the thing 'bout right, John Gaston," Shep made reply, stroking his long beard and laughing softly.

"Well," my father resumed, in the same placid voice and manner, "I want to say to you, then, that I won't do it!"

"Well, I'll be teetotally condemned!" Dickson exclaimed, in surprise and anger, drawing down his bushy brows and frowning darkly. "What the mischief ails you two fellers to-day, anyhow?"

"We're ready to git red o' Vance Chatham an' Kaintuck, right now—to-night," was the decided statement of my father. "Le's give him his walkin'-papers an' start him."

"I tell you it won't do!" Shep cried excitedly, smacking his palms. "I know a thing 'r two, if I was raised on pork an' flapjacks. This feller's a Kentuckian—don't fergit that; an' he won't take walkin'-papers from nobody. You can't run him off; he never sucked that kind o' milk. Try it—an' you'll have a hornet's nest stirred up an' buzzin' 'round y'r ears in no time. He's been hired to teach y'r school, John. Ev'rybody'll sympathize with him an' stand by him; an' ev'rybody'll be askin' questions. It'd be so hot we'd have to leave between two days; an' be glad o' the chance to git away. You can't fool me! Let him stay, steal the hoss—a few weeks from now, an' then raise the cry that he's a slave-driver an' not fit to teach the school, an' the people'll run him off the'rselves. My plan's the best one—an' the only one. You can't fool *me*!"

I felt a series of tremulous movements of the hay. Vance was actually laughing!

"Yes," my father muttered, with a string of oaths, "an' in the meantime he'll be at my house—

an' win that gal o' mine; 'r make a fool of 'er, anyhow."

"That's it, by heaven!" Marsh exploded.

I stirred, and in so doing made a slight noise. Vance caught my shoulder and gave it a hard squeeze, and I heard him breathing heavily and gritting his teeth.

"Oho!" Shep chuckled. "So *that's* how the land lays, eh? I thought you fellers was hidin' somethin' from me. Now, le's have an understandin' right quick; somebody may come nosin' 'round here any minute. Out with it. What's in the wind?"

"Ruth's to marry Marsh," my father said flatly.

"Well, who's Ruth?" Shep inquired.

"My gal—the gal that keeps house fer me," was the reply.

"She ain't your gal, John."

"I've got lawful control of her, anyhow."

"That may be. But go on—tell me all 'bout it."

"Well, set down here."

They again seated themselves, and my father continued: "Ruth's my brother Hiram's gal. Her mother—who was a New Orle'ns French woman—died on givin' the gal birth; an' her father died o' the effects o' yaller fever three years later.

"Hi was alluz of a roamin' disposition—he was younger 'n me—an' left home fer good w'en he was eighteen years old. We didn't hear no more of him fer 'leven years. . Then, one day, he come staggerin' in, lookin' like a yaller ghost an' carryin' a two-year-old gal baby in his arms.

"Father an' mother was both dead by that time;

an' me an' my wife was livin' on the ol' home place in Belmont county. My wife took to the little baby gal at once, an' the child took to her. She cuddled an' petted the little thing, an' took it right to 'er heart."

My father's rough voice was thick with emotion. Never had I seen him so moved. He was living over the happy, innocent days of his younger manhood—ere the thirst for gold and gear had dried up the springs of his heart and left it a sandy waste. His old nature—his better nature—was struggling for the ascendancy, too. Oh, that he had yielded! But pshaw! It is all past—long, long ago!

John Gaston proceeded—and now his voice was hard and firm.

"Well, Hi lived purty near a year. He'd never said a word 'bout hisself n'r his child—who her mother was, n'r nothin'; an' me an' my wife had gone on takin' keer of 'em, an' askin' no questions. 'Bout a month 'fore he died, though, he called me into the room one day an' says:

" 'John, I hain't got long to live—I know it; an' I want to have a talk with you.'"

"I told him to go ahead; an' he made a clean breast o' the whole thing. It 'pears he'd made a fortune runnin' a gamblin'-hell in New Orle'ns. Then he'd married a young French woman of a rich fam'ly, 'g'inst her parents' wishes; an' they disowned 'er. W'en the child was to be born, the mother went to a Catholic hospital in the city; an' there she died. The sisters was mighty good to the poor young thing; an'

Hi thought a heap of 'em fer it. He wound up his talk to me by sayin':

"'John, I've got twenty thousand dollars in gold in that ol' hair-covered trunk. Call in a lawyer; I want to make a will.'

"I done as he wanted me to; an' he made a will like this: He willed me the child an' the money—till she was eighteen years old. I was to invest the money as I saw fit; an' the proceeds was to be mine. All I was to do was to feed, an' clothe, an' school the gal—jest as if she was my own. I've done the best I knowed how. The will says that w'en she's eighteen—which'll be next spring—half of the proceeds goes to her, till she marries. If she marries the man I pick out fer her, she gits half 'the estate; an' I git the other half. If she don't marry the man I pick, the whole thing goes to the hospital in New Orle'ns where her mother died. I hain't got no idee why Hi fixed things in that way; but he did. He was alluz a queer chap. Maybe it ain't a fair an' just will—'tain't fer me to say; but I ain't to blame—I didn't make it."

The inflection of my father's voice indicated that he considered the subject exhausted. However, Shep seemed to think differently; for presently he asked:

"What's to become o' the estate, pr'vided the gal dies 'fore she's of age?"

"It goes to me," my father answered.

"It's a wonder she *hain't* died."

"What're you 'sinuatin', Shep Dickson?" my father said quickly and sharply.

"Nothin' at all, John," Shep laughed in reply. "Don't be so touchy; can't a feller joke you?"

"I don't like no such jokes," John Gaston grumbled. "You don't mean I'd *kill* my niece, I reckon?"

"N—o, I don't mean that, hardly, I reckon. But I'll tell you what I've heerd, John—mind you, I don't say it's so. I've heerd it said that w'en the gal was little, she was mighty sick once, an' that you wouldn't 'ave a doctor fer her, till y'r wife threatened you an' made you do it."

"It's an infernal lie!" my father whispered hoarsely. "I like Ruth better 'n I like my own boy; he's too much like his mother—fer *me*."—I did not wince, though I felt that he was revealing the truth.—"I like 'er better 'n anybody else on earth. There!"

"Exceptin' y'rself, of course."

My father sullenly bit his lip and refused to make reply.

Shep continued tauntingly: "I s'pose it's 'cause you think so much of 'er, that you've picked out such a fine feller fer 'er husband, John—eh?"

"Cuss you, Shep Dickson!" Marsh snorted, leaping to his feet. "Let up on that!"

"What's the matter, Marshy—little boy?" Shep asked, with lifted brows and a stare of childlike innocence. "Didn't I say you was a fine feller, an' hain't I had the means o' knowin'? Set down, an' keep cool; you're liable to melt, if you git hot."

Then, to my father: "John, who has that will in the'r keepin'?"

"W'y, it's probated, of course."

"Of course—that's so,"—musingly.—"Did it require you to give bond?"

A negative shake of the head was my father's reply.

"N'r the court didn't?"

"No."

"An' you was to raise the gal as y'r own, eh?"

"Yes."

"An' wasn't to let her know but what she was y'r own child?"

"The will don't say nothin' 'bout that."

"Well, you *hain't* never told 'er nothin' 'bout 'er parents n'r the property, have you?"

"No."

"*Why* hain't you?"

"Jest 'cause I didn't want to, that's why."

"D'you think she knows?"

"I don't know. I s'pect ther's been meddlers enough to hint it to 'er; but she's never said nothin' to me."

"Y'r wife wanted you to tell the gal all about it, didn't she?"

"I guess so,"—yawning.

"John, y'r wife was consider'ble younger 'n you, wasn't she?"

My father nodded grumpily; it was plain that the conversation was not to his liking. But Shep persisted:

"She was a mighty nice lady—that I know—purty, smart an' good."

"She was *too* good—that was the trouble with 'er," my father growled.

I clenched my small fists and quivered; I felt that I must rush forth, screaming, and fly at him.

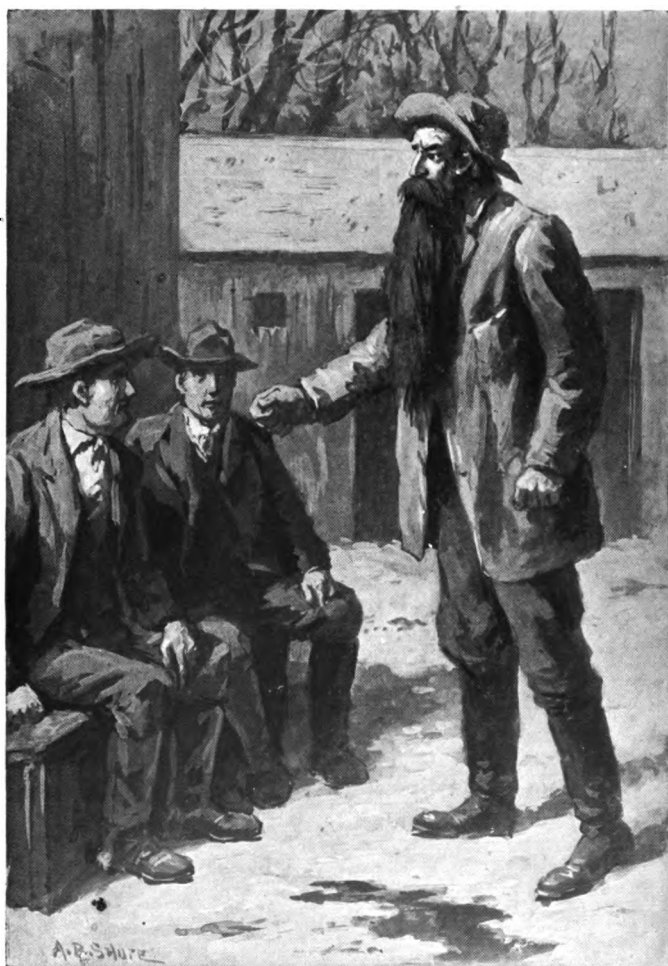
"Too good fer such fellers as me an' you, John Gaston—that's the Lord's solemn truth!" Shep assented feelingly. "I've often wondered how you got 'er—how you ever fooled 'er into marryin' the likes o' you."

"Well, you can jest go on wonderin'!" was the snappish reply. "'Taint none o' y'r business, anyhow."

"N—o, 'tain't none o' my business—that's right. But I know one thing, John; you'd 'ave been a better man if you'd listened to 'er. It don't make no differ'nce what becomes o' such cusses as me; I hain't got a relative on top o' sod. But it's differ'nt with you; you had a nice wife—an' you've got your niece an' y'r boy. You ort to respect y'r wife's mem'ry, an' ort to do y'r duty by y'r dead brother's——"

"Oh, cuss it, Shep—dry up!" my father interrupted angrily, squirming upon his seat. "I'll 'tend to my own affairs. An' I *am* doin' my duty by Ruth; I'm carryin' out the pr'visions o' the will—jest as I've done all the way through. I s'pose you're like my wife: want me to rob myself, let the gal do as she pleases, an' give 'er ev'rything. I ain't a-goin' to do it! She'll marry Marsa, 'r the money'll go to the hospital in New Orle'ns, I don't keer much which; I've saved enough to keep me from want, anyhow. Now, if you've got business to talk, talk it, 'r I'll straddle my hoss an' go home."

"That's *my* ticket, too," Colby said approvingly.



“I’m captain o’ the gang, an’ my word ’s law.”

I was surprised at Shep Dickson's words; I had not considered him capable of such worthy sentiments as he had expressed. Vance stirred uneasily. He was panting with the effort of holding his feelings in abeyance.

"All right, boys!" I heard Dickson say briskly and decidedly. "I'll talk business; an' here's the word with the bark on: You two infernal scoundrels can go an' do as you please with Ruth Gaston an' 'er money; I won't say another word. I don't have to wash my hands o' the matter, fer I never had nothin' to do with the dirty job. I'm a hard nut—I am—a common hoss thief an' swindler. Ev'rybody knows it, if they don't *say* it. But I ain't quite orn'ry enough to rob a defenseless gal of 'er rights, jest 'cause a will—made by a half-crazy man—gives me the legal pow'r to do so. Go ahead—an' do your dirty doin's. But let me say this to you: Damn *me* if I ain't done with you! I don't want to do business with rogues that's orn'rier 'n I am—an' I won't! I'll finish up the job I'm on, an' then I'm done! I'll look after Kaintuck an' his master, though; that's my affair. I'm captain o' the gang, an' my word's law, I'll let you know. An' things is goin' to be jest as I say! You two surly devils can put that in y'r pipe an' smoke it! Jest dare to disobey my orders, an' I'll make this neighborhood so hot fer you that hell'll be colder 'n Greenland's icy mountains, by comparison!"

He rose and straddled around the corner. My father and Marsh got up and faced each other, silently and dubiously shook their heads, and slowly

moved away from the spot. When the sound of their footsteps had died out Vance and I crawled from our places of concealment.

"Tom," he said in an agitated whisper, "eaves-dropping is mean, dishonorable. I'm ashamed of myself! But one has to fight fire with fire. I hid in there on purpose; it was no accident. I told you that if the devil should hide a thing from me, one of his imps would show it to me. There were three of them this time, however."

And he laughed a nervous, forced laugh. Then he seized my arm and went on earnestly: "Remember, Tom—you and I are comrades! Don't breathe a word of this to any living soul, not to Ruth—Miss Gaston—even. Wait until I give you leave. Do you promise?"

I nodded gravely, looking straight into his eyes.

"All right!" he concluded. "Now slip out at the back door, and hurry off toward the house. I'll wait a while—until you've been gone a few minutes. Be off, now—hurry!"

When I emerged into the glaring light of the afternoon sun I blinkingly surveyed my surroundings. The sale was over, and the purchasers were settling with the clerk. Shep Dickson's horse was gone from the barnyard; so was David Ryal's. Each had gone his separate way.

I rode home behind Vance—my father and Marsh Colby silently bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER VII

It was sundown when we reached home. All the way Vance had ridden with bowed head, seldom speaking; and I had remained unwontedly quiet. But at sight of the blue smoke curling from the great stone chimneys, I perked up and began to whistle; at which Vance roused himself and engaged me in a cheerful conversation.

Bill and Tildy were in the stableyard doing the milking, and Ruth was preparing supper—and singing at the top of her clear young voice. The gray old building, the tinkling cowbells, the querulous clatter of the chickens going to roost, the gathering shadows of the frosty dusk—all spoke of home, and comfort, and peace.

Granny Watson had made two kettlefuls of soft soap, and had wended her way over the hilltops toward her home. And I heaved a sigh of relief when I learned of her departure; for the thought of her uncanny presence sent a shiver up my spine that rustled the roots of my hair.

No one appeared greatly surprised at Vance's return or at the announcement that he was going to teach our school—Ruth, least of all. Bill Kirk alone dubiously shook his head, and muttered something about "w'enever the devil wants to hold a dance, he can alluz find a fool fer a fiddler."

I faithfully kept my solemn pact with Vance. Ruth did not question me; she simply looked the wistfulness she felt, and that hurt me deeply. For I did *so* desire to tell her all I had learned, to hear her say again that come what might she would always be my sister.

But Bill plied me unmercifully. Out of patience with me at last, he cried peevishly:

"Tom Gaston, you're the most pr'vokin an' c'ntrary chap I ever seen! You're like a danged wet-weather spring; alluz spoutin' w'en there ain't no call fer it, an' alluz dry w'en there is! It was me put it into y'r noggin to go out to Bailey's sale, expectin' you to find out somethin', maybe, an' come back an' tell me. Now you're like the feller that got his head blowed off in the powdermill: you hain't got nothin' to say. Stiller'n the everlastin' tomb, ain't you? All right! Maybe that's the way to treat an ol' friend! But I've got ears an' eyes of my own—that is, I've got *one* eye; and I know how to keep 'em open. I've got a tongue, too; an' I'll keep it from waggin'. You'll see!"

He paused to note the effect of his words; but I remained obdurate, and he continued lugubriously:

"W'en you wanted wheels made fer a wagon, it was ol' Bill made 'em; an' w'en you wanted to learn to shoot a gun, it was ol' Bill had to show you how. An' ol' Bill strapped y'r skates, an' learnt you how to trap mus'rats. Seems y'r mem'ry of a kindness, Tom, don't last no longer 'n a muley cow's horns. You're alluz up and a-comin' to do what I don't want done. Dogged if you ain't a good 'eal like

Job Rowley. D' I ever tell you 'bout him breakin' th' jugs fer ol' Lias Stetson, Tom?"

"No," I said, with alacrity, pleased with the prospect of a change of subject.

"Well, drop on that log, an' I'll spin you the yarn. 'Twon't take but a minute 'r two."—We were carrying in the night's supply of firewood. "Ol' Lias Stetson used to keep groc'ry down to Malconta. He was a kind o' bristly ol' feller—with the fur alluz rubbed the wrong way; an' was mighty fond o' argyin'. Was alluz discussin' an' cussin'; an' cussin' more'n discussin'.

"Ther' was a shiftless, simple feller named Job Rowley loafed 'round the groc'ry a good 'eal, toastin' his shins at the stove in winter, an' wearin' out the seat of his pants on the salt bar'ls in summer. Lias kep' the lazy cuss in tobacker, fer what little work he could get out o' him. But, ev'ry once in a while Job 'ld balk an' wouldn't do nothin'. Then ol' Lias 'ld rip an' cuss a blue streak—till the air'd smell o' brimstone fer a week afterwards.

"Well, one cold mornin' in Feb'uary, Squire Thomas dropped into the groc'ry, and him an' Lias got to argyfyin' 'bout whether the whale swallered Jonar, 'r Jonar swallered th' whale—'r somethin' 'bout as important an' probable. An' they kept it up fer a couple of hours 'r so—till the fire had gone out, an' both of them was hoppin' mad.

"Job was settin' with his stool tilted 'g'inst the woodbox, chawin' his tobacker an' whittlin'; but he never offered to fix up the fire. At last Lias ordered him to do it, an' Job refused; swore he wouldn't do

another lick o' work that day, fer love n'r money. Ol' Lias had to kindle up the fire hisself; an' he nearly cussed the roof off.

"Well, jest as he'd got the fire to goin', in comes a customer fer a gallon o' m'lasses. The feller didn't have no jug; so Lias took one from a lot that was piled up in one corner of the room, set it under the faucet o' the m'lasses bar'l, went back to his argyment—an' forgot all 'bout ev'rything else.

"Purty soon the customer asked if his m'lasses was ready, an' Lias jumped up an' run back to the jug. Well, sir, ther' wasn't a drop o' m'lasses in it. The thick, sticky stuff had run down the side, an' the floor was covered fer a yard square. Lias was crazy mad all in a jiffy, of course. He grabbed up the sticky, smeared jug an' smashed it into the pile in the corner—breakin' the one he throwed an' a half-dozen others. Then he kicked three 'r four more, an' broke them, an' jumped up an' down an' swore like a keel-boatman.

"Job Rowley was settin' behind the stove, a-mulin' an' a-grumblin' that he'd never do another lick o' work as long as he lived. But as soon as he seen what Lias was doin', he jumped up as spry's a katy-did, runs over to the corner, an' says as cheerful as you please:

"'Let me help you, Lias!'

"An' then he sailed in, a-kickin' an' a-smashin' as if his life d'pended on it; an' 'fore Lias an' the Squire an' the customer could choke the breath out o' him an' drag him away, he'd broke ev'ry jug in the store. Dang *me*, if he didn't!"

Bill lay back and hawhawed, and I forced myself to join him. He was so pleased over the reception I gave his story that he neglected to make the application of the moral—and forgot to question me further.

The succeeding three weeks passed uneventfully. On Saturday—following Bailey's sale on Thursday—Vance went to Malconta to take the test before the county board of teachers' examiners. I accompanied him, riding Dick, the black gelding, and ate dinner with him at the hotel. And never did raw youngster dread an ordeal more—or feel more complacent after it was safely over. That day shines out as one of the red-letter days of my life.

Vance easily secured a certificate; and, on the Monday following, he took his place behind the teacher's desk in the little frame schoolhouse upon the hill.

A more pretentious seat of learning has replaced the old, long since—a structure of obtrusive white, with garish-green shutters and ginger-bread portico and belfry. But the old house was endeared to me by association; and I miss it sadly—that is, whenever I pass that way, which is rarely. It was decrepit and scarred and bent. Its small-paned windows stared unblinkingly at the morning sunlight; its gray weather-boarding was the cloak of a barefoot friar. An outside chimney of brick and stone stood at one end; and at the other extremity was the low doorway, with unhewn stone steps leading up to it. The house stood at the side of the byroad running through the fields and woods—like

a shabby mendicant asking alms, and offering a blessing in return; and several sturdy giants of the forest locked their arms over it, to shield and defend it. Inside were deep and wide fireplace, unpainted walls and ceiling, dingy and dented blackboards and rude desks and benches; and over all hung a musty and characteristic odor of sanctity.

Of sanctity? Yes, let the statement stand.

Vance encountered little opposition or difficulty at the outset of the term. His word was law; his desk was his throne. Of course, he had to deal with the open rebellion of a squad of large boys led by Jack Colby—Marsh's brother—who sought to carry out the high-handed and treasonable crime of dethronement, as had been their yearly custom. But Vance easily proved himself equal to the emergency; and the uprising was promptly quelled. He soundly walloped—no other word so well describes the punishment administered—the ringleader and his lieutenants, and thereby firmly established himself upon his throne and in the favor of the rebels. For in those days no law was known but the law of physical force, and to be respected, a teacher must be feared. Flogging was resorted to as a punishment for offenses great and small. It was considered necessary—and it *was* necessary. The teacher who did not stand ready to back up his word of command with cudgel and fist soon found himself out of the schoolroom—and out of a job.

Directors and parents loyally stood by Vance in his effort to prove himself ruler of his domain; and

soon everything was running systematically, and with little friction.

Naturally, I was pleased and satisfied with the new teacher; and, just as naturally, I was not a little vainglorious over the favored position I occupied. Did not the teacher board at my home, and did I not walk to school with him each morning and home with him each evening? Also, did not he familiarly call me "Tom," instead of the distant and formal "Thomas" I had known from all former schoolmasters? And was not I his supposed confidant? What more of glory could a reasonable boy wish for or expect?

The jaunt that Vance and I took each morning lay up the hill immediately back of our barn, and along the high ridge bordering the creek valley. The distance was about two miles. The road, a mere byway or bridlepath, zigzagged through woodland and clearing, wormed its way across pasture and tobacco-field, crawled past Granny Watson's hut and the schoolhouse, and finally lost its identity in a mesh of sheep trails—in what was known as Rattlesnake woods. It was a tortuous, bramble-bordered track; but I knew every inch of it, and could find my way along it—with celerity and certainty—the darkest night that ever gave birth to a winter tempest.

What intimate and confidential talks Vance and I used to have as we trudged to and fro along the sun-baked, rain-gullied road—where the dead wood-thistle nodded us a welcome, and the gray squirrel flirted his tail in cheery salutation! I revealed to

him my boyish dreams and aspirations, my immature aims and ambitions; and he told me much of his past—of his life on the big plantation he had called home, of his days at school and college. Ill-matched twain that we were, we became comrades indeed. Yet in school he was master, and I was pupil. Whether my conduct merited blame or praise, I received my due—just as did others. But I loved him! And he must have loved me, even then. For he bore with my incessant and silly prattle when we were alone, and always had a kind word of encouragement or advice for me.

On mornings that promised fair we did not carry our dinner to school with us, but left Ruth to fetch it warm at the noon hour. She heartily approved of the arrangement, as it gave her an opportunity for a gallop over the hills, gracefully and firmly seated upon the back of Kaintuck, a thing she greatly enjoyed.

With my elbows upon the high desk in front of me, as the noon hour drew near, I would con my spelling lesson and keep my ears cocked for the hoofbeats of her steed; and when I caught the welcome sound my heart would beat rapturously. Then would come a glimpse of horse and rider, flitting past the windows, and the smart rap of a riding-whip upon the door.

I would fix my eyes upon Vance. Book in hand, he would advance to the door, throw it open, and pass out—his step elastic, his face radiant.

That picture—the picture of Ruth and Kaintuck, framed in the narrow doorway—is one of the dearest

I can recall as I sit in the sunset glow of life, with the lengthening shadows around me. Eyes alight, cheeks aglow, tresses adrift, how fair and sweet she was! The object of my boyish adoration—my ideal—my idol!

Vance would softly close the door behind him; and immediately the school would be in an uproar—boys tussling, paper wads flying, girls giggling. But at the lift of the latch every urchin would be in his place, his eyes upon his book, his mind upon his lesson—of course.

Then, again, horse and rider would flit past the windows; and Ruth would be gone, and Vance would be behind his desk.

Dear delightful days of the long ago—for, in spite of youthful troubles and perplexities, I was care-free and happy to a degree I have never known since—how my heart goes out to you, and longs for your return!

Vance always helped me with my evening chores. Supper over and the things cleared away, he heard Ruth recite her lessons—she studied at home, under his direction—and assisted her over difficult places. I watched them by the hour, as—with heads close together—they solved knotty problems or disentangled snarled sentences; and I marked their growing intimacy, their growing love. Also, I was keenly aware of my father's dark looks and his increasing irritation and uneasiness—things to which the lovers were blind, or to which they gave little heed.

Marsh Colby had been in the habit of coming to our home—with my father's consent, and at his in-

vitiation—and forcing his unwelcome attentions upon Ruth. But now he seldom put in an appearance; and when he did he rode past like a whirlwind, his countenance black with hate and rage—or paused long enough, only, to speak a word with my father.

Though a cloud of impending evil was over us, and we felt that the storm must break sooner or later, we—all of the household except my father—were measurably happy. He went about surly and silent. Two or three times a week he made a trip to the Coon tavern to get his jug refilled; and the effect of his excesses grew more and more patent. Every night he went drunk to bed; and every morning he arose nauseated and trembling, and could eat no breakfast until he had made a visit to the granary—where he kept his store of liquor. He treated Vance with scant civility; but he did not order the young Kentuckian to leave—as I rather feared and expected.

Of evenings, after lessons were over, Vance played the violin and Ruth sang, while Tildy knitted industriously and Bill and I played checkers. My father, if present, had little to say, but sat in the shadows, moodily smoking and dozing.

David Ryal occasionally dropped in upon us, bringing with him an atmosphere of jollity, and lighting the whole house with his smiling full-moon visage; and he was always welcome. But he and Vance, by tacit understanding, never resumed their debate upon the slavery question. David's comings and goings were more or less secret and mysterious.

We understood they had to do with the business of the Underground railroad; but he vouchsafed no information, and we asked no questions. However, I sometimes saw him in close confab with my father and Bill Kirk. He may have made confidants of them; I rather think he did.

One raw, damp evening, about the third week of school, Shep Dickson rode up to our gate and called for my father. In the gathering gloom they stood and talked for half an hour. Then Shep vaulted into the saddle and galloped off up the road toward the Coon tavern; and my father came in to supper. After he had eaten he put on his hat and raincoat, remarking:

"Shep Dickson was jest tellin' me of a nice bunch o' cattle fer sale, ten miles out on the other side o' the river. Said if I went right away, I might pick 'em up at a bargain. I'm goin' to ride over to-night; and I won't be back till sometime to-morrower."

But his eyes were downcast and shifty as he said it, and a hang-dog expression rested upon his face. I saw Bill and Ruth exchange knowing glances. Tildy was not present, and Vance did not appear to take notice of what my father was saying. The glances exchanged between Ruth and Bill set me to thinking, so, when my father left the house, I followed him at a distance. I waited by the gate, while he went on to the stable. Soon he led forth Bess, stiffly climbed into the saddle, and jogged off toward Colby's furnace.

For some time I stood leaning against one of the

hewed gate-posts, pondering deeply. Darkness surrounded me; the dense fog rising from the near-by bottoms embraced and chilled me. I was about to turn and go indoors when I became aware of an approaching horseman. He was coming up the road, at a swinging lope. I cannot explain why it was, but intuitively I felt that it would not be well to let him know of my presence. Crouching behind the post against which I had been leaning, I shivered—looked and listened. Horse and rider swiftly approached my hiding place, and flitted past—dusky shapes in the fog and darkness. But I knew the gait of the horse; I recognized the dimly-outlined figure of the rider—silhouetted against the skyline above the stables. It was my father!

He had willfully deceived us, then, as to his destination and his business. He had purposely and deliberately lied. I was not surprised; I had suspected as much. Mischief was afoot, undoubtedly. But what was the nature of it?

I slowly arose and stretched my cramped limbs. A slight shuffling noise near me attracted my attention, and I turned, to find Bill Kirk at my side.

"That was y'r pap, wasn't it, Tom?" he asked in a stage whisper.

"I guess so," I said cautiously.

"I thought it was," Bill went on thoughtfully, "judgin' from the move of the hoss; I couldn't see him. Must 'ave changed his mind mighty sudden—suddener 'n ol' Arch Ryder spit out the peppersass at his sister's infare dinner. An' that was so sudden that his false teeth went out with it. 'R

else he ain't *got* no mind, an' moves backward jest as easy as he does forward—jest like a crawfish."

With the conclusion of his sage remarks he passed through the gate and strode toward the barn, twanging through his nose:

"'Hold y'r hand—hold y'r hand, Knight William,'
she cried;
'Y'r hand—y'r hand, I implore!
As fer true lovers, I can git many a one—
As fer fathers, I can never git more.'"

I returned to the house and wandered restlessly from room to room—thinking, thinking. Gradually everything became clear to me. Shep Dickson had called upon my father earlier in the evening; now my father had gone to join the gang of horse thieves in the contemplated raid of which Vance and I had overheard the captain speak. It was a fit night for such a project. Before another day had dawned they would have passed by our place, taken Kaintuck with them, crossed the river and found concealment in Newburne's big woods. My father had ridden a short distance down the road to deceive us; then he had turned about, retraced and gone in the direction of Sunday creek—far beyond the Coon tavern.

Yes, it was all plain to me. Ruth and Bill suspected something; that was the meaning of their exchange of glances. But what did they know? And was Vance aware of the threatened loss of his horse? I could not answer these questions, and I

was greatly worried. Should I tell Vance of my father's suspicious movements? I was pledged not to reveal anything to any other person, and I was in a sad state of uncertainty—afraid to proceed in any direction, afraid to stand still.

At last, however, I decided to inform my comrade of what I had learned and let him determine what was best to do.

With this intent I went from the kitchen—where I had been pacing up and down like a caged tiger—to the sitting-room, where Vance and Ruth were poring over a lesson in grammar. I found them sitting side by side, reading by the flickering light of the fire—and oblivious to everything but themselves and the book before them. I clumped about the floor, shuffled my feet and snapped my fingers, whistled and coughed—all to attract Vance's attention, that I might signal to him my desire to speak privately with him. But he placidly went on with the lesson of language and love—mumbling of tenses and moods, of cases and genders, and was deaf to my repeated efforts. Discouraged—and disgusted, I left the house, banging the door after me.

A while I stood upon the steps, my hands thrust into my trousers' pockets, deep down. With unseeing eyes I gazed intently into the surrounding darkness. The sullen rumble and roar of the creek was in my ears; the breath of the clinging fog was in my nostrils. I was hot and cold by turns. I pushed back my hat, thus baring my forehead to the cool night air; and patted my foot restlessly.

Chancing to look toward the barn, I perceived a light streaming through the chinks in the wall of the horse-stable; and, aimlessly, I sauntered in that direction. I found Bill Kirk seated upon an up-turned basket, industriously mending a halter, by the uncertain light of the dented tin lantern. His patched coat was buttoned around his chest, the collar of the garment upturned, and his fingers were stiff and clumsy with the cold.

"Why didn't you come into the kitchen and do that, Bill?" I asked, seating myself upon the door-sill and narrowly observing him.

"Fer the same reason the Lord didn't make white blackbirds," he answered crustily; "I could 'ave done it, but I didn't want to."

"Why didn't you want to?" I inquired.

"Jest 'cause I didn't—that's why," he growled through his whiskers. "Now shut up—an' go back to the house."

"It's cold out here, isn't it, Bill?"

"Yep!"

"Aren't you cold?"

"Nope, not very."

"I am," I said, fetching a shiver.

"Well, go on back to the house, then, as I told you," he muttered, viciously jabbing his awl through a strip of leather and squinting his one eye in an effort to see the hole. "Go on, now—an' quit botherin' me!"

"I guess I will——" I began. Then I broke off abruptly, and stood staring at the horse in the stall nearest the door.

"What's the matter?" Bill asked sharply, looking up from his work.

"Where's Kaintuck?" I interrogated.

"In the last stall, at the other end of the stable. Why?"

"Who put him there?"

"I did."

"And changed old Charley to Kaintuck's stall?"

"Yep."

"What for, Bill?"

His attention was fixed upon his work, and he did not look up as he answered with a sly chuckle:

"Thought maybe Kaintuck 'ld rest better in the other end o' the stable—to-night, 'specially."

With the sentence he finished his job and picked up the lantern, signifying that he was ready to return to the house.

As he was fastening the door with the wooden pin used for the purpose he mumbled to himself:

"'Taint no use to lock the stable door after the hoss is stoled; that's lockin' him *out*, stid o' lockin' him *in*."

Then as we were crossing the road: "Talkin' o' hosses alluz makes me think o' Shep Dickson's trade with Steve Lightner. Ever tell you that one, Tom?"

"Y-e-s, no—I guess not," I answered haphazardly, my mind on Shep Dickson, but not concerned with his horse-trades.

Bill rambled on—in a transparent effort to divert my thoughts: "Shep an' Steve traded hosses. Steve had a big fam'ly o' boys an' gals, an' was

anxious to git a good fam'ly hoss—one that his wife an' the children wouldn't be 'feared to drive. Shep claimed that his hoss was jest the kind.

“ ‘Good fam'ly hoss, is he, Shep?’ says Steve.

“ ‘Anybody can drive him jest as well as I can,’ answered Shep.

“ ‘An' he's sound, is he?’ Steve goes on.

“ ‘Sound as a holler log,’ answers Shep. ‘The only thing wrong with him is he don't keep very well.’

“ ‘I don't keer a dang fer that!’ says Steve, ‘I can fatten him up, if anybody can. Jerk off y'r saddle; it's a swap.’

“ ‘Well,’ Bill continued as we reached the house and paused upon the step, “Steve took the old crow-bait home an' tried to hitch him up. He had to git his wife an' all the children to come out an' help him; an' they had a time of it. An', as soon as the c'n-trary critter found hisself hitched, he pitched in an' kicked the harness into ribbons an' the buggy into kindlin' wood. The next day Steve took him and went back to Shep to rue bargain.

“ ‘Shep,’ says he, ‘I've come to trade back.’

“ ‘That so!’ says Shep. ‘What fer?’

“ ‘ ‘Cause the hoss kicked ev'rything to pieces, an' nearly killed ten 'r a dozen o' my children—not mentionin' the ol' woman an' three 'r four houn' pups—when I went to hitch him up an' drive him,’ answers Steve.

“ ‘You don't say!’ laughs Shep.

“ ‘Yes, I *do* say!’ snorts Steve. ‘An I want to trade back.’

“ ‘Can’t do it—can’t do it no way at all,’ grins Shep.

“ ‘You can’t?’ bellers Steve, crackin’ his fists an’ flyin’ ’round like a whirligig in a windstorm. ‘Didn’t you say this was a fam’ly hoss?’

“ ‘I did,’ answers Shep. ‘An’ ain’t he?’

“ ‘No, he ain’t!’

“ ‘Didn’t it take the whole fam’ly to hitch him up?’ says Shep, as solemn as a blind mule. ‘That’s what I meant by his bein’ a fam’ly hoss.’

“ ‘You said anybody could drive him as well as you could,’ whines Steve, his jaw droppin’.

“ ‘Anybody *can* drive him as well’s I can,’ haw-haws Shep. ‘I never *could* drive him; an’ I don’t b’lieve anybody else can.’

“ ‘But you said he was sound, Shep,’ Steve sobs, the tears runnin’ down his cheeks.

“ ‘I said he was sound as a holler log,’ answers Shep. ‘An’ ain’t he? A holler log ain’t very sound, to my notion, Steve.’

“ ‘But, Shep,’ Steve goes on, purty near a-blubberin’ right out, ‘you give me to understand ther’ wasn’t nothin’ ailed the hoss—only he didn’t keep very well.’

“ ‘I see now where I made a slight mistake,’ Shep tittered. ‘I emphasized the wrong word. I meant to say that the hoss didn’t keep very *well*. An’ the Lord knows he don’t—fer he was sick ’most all the time I had him.’ ”

I was standing on the stone step in front of the door leading into the sitting-room, my shoulders humped, my hands in my pockets up to my elbows,

and my teeth chattering. At the conclusion of Bill's interminable yarn I reached for the doorlatch—at the same time applauding his well-meant effort to amuse me, with a feeble giggle.

"He laid his hairy hand upon my arm, and asked pathetically: "Wasn't that a purty good story, Tom?"

"Uh-huh," I managed to say, fetching a shuddering yawn.

"You enjoyed it, didn't you, Tom—me tellin' you that story?"

I nodded, noisily stamping my cold feet.

"Well, that bein' the case, Tom, you won't say nothin' to nobody 'bout my changin' the hosses in the stalls, will you?" he asked anxiously.

"Maybe I'll tell Vance," I admitted.

"No, you mustn't do it!" he cried in a voice of mild consternation.

"Why?" I returned wonderingly.

"*Why*—you young simpleton? 'Cause it'll make a lot o' trouble, *that's* why. I wish to glory you hadn't found it out! You're alluz pokin' 'round an' findin' out things—dang it! You know what I done it fer, don't you?"

"I—I guess not," I answered, shaking my head.

I was pretending ignorance. I *did* know.

"You don't *know*!" he whined pettishly. "Tom Gaston, you're dumber 'n a bobsled! But I'll explain it to you. Somebody might want to take Kaintuck out o' the stable to-night. If they try it now, they'll git ol' Charley. Understand?"

I bobbed my head, and he went on:

"'Cause whoever would try to borry Kaintuck 'ld know what stall he's been standin' in; an' wouldn't take no chances o' bein' ketched by carryin' a light. That's all plain, ain't it?"

"Yes," I murmured.

He proceeded: "Well, all right, then. Now you mustn't say a word to nobody 'bout what I've done."

"Why can't I tell Vance? He ought to know; it's his horse."

"You dumb dunce!" Bill jerked out. "Tell Vance an' he'll take that big pistol o' his an' lay out at the stable an' watch; an' make a pepperbox lid o' somebody's hide. I know *him*!"

I was duly impressed with the picture Bill so graphically drew, and I promptly resolved to keep to myself all knowledge of the subterfuge he had practiced; and I so informed him. The eccentric fellow curtly expressed his satisfaction at my decision; and we passed into the house.

That evening we hugged the glowing hearth, as usual; but Vance did not have recourse to Bill's fiddle, and Ruth did not sing. Conversation was an effort—and a dismal failure; and, at last, we found ourselves sitting thoughtful and silent—gazing abstractedly into the fire.

We retired early. For hours I tossed restlessly from one side of the bed to the other, turned my pillow and patted it into new shapes, and smoothed and rearranged the covers. I heard the clock down stairs strike ten—eleven—twelve. Vance lay perfectly still. His breathing was deep and regular; and I thought him asleep.

The wire edge gradually wore off my nerves, and I dropped into a light doze—still straining my senses, in a subconscious way, however. Half-asleep, half-awake, I became dimly aware of a series of movements on Vance's part. The room was in darkness; and I could not have seen him had I had full command of all my senses and faculties. But in some occult way, I felt him rise from his bed, dress himself, raise the window a few inches, and seat himself beside it.

When I came to myself, I was standing at his side, panting with nervous excitement, my hand upon his shoulder.

"What do you want, Tom?" was his whispered query.

"What're you up and dressed for?" I countered in a guarded undertone.

"I'm expecting visitors," was his reply.

I could not distinguish his features—his form alone being vaguely visible, outlined by the faint light of the open window; but I knew from the cadence of his voice that he was full of laughter—that he was broadly smiling.

"Visitors?" I repeated blankly.

"Yes, visitors who admire Kaintuck so much that they may attempt to take him from the stable and put him through his paces."

I understood his meaning; but I made no reply.

"Wrap yourself in a quilt and sit down here—out of the draft," he remarked, pushing a chair toward me.

I complied, and sat silent for some minutes. Then

I asked: "What are you going to do, Vance, if they do come—and try to steal Kaintuck?"

"Shoot the first man that lays hands on him," he answered calmly but decidedly.

I realized at once that I must reveal Bill's secret. Otherwise, Vance would do murder. And the victim might be my own father! The horror of the thought caused me to shrink away from my companion and cower against the wall. Evidently my action revealed to him my state of mind, for he put his arm around me and drew me to him, and whispered softly:

"Don't worry, Tom, I'll not hurt anyone, if I can help it—least of all, your father. He won't touch Kaintuck, though. Don't you remember he said he wouldn't have anything to do with the job—of—of stealing from his own guest?"

I answered in the affirmative. Then I added: "But nobody'll steal Kaintuck, Vance."

"What makes you say that?" he inquired quickly.

I told him what Bill had done; and the irrational fellow almost choked with suppressed laughter.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" he asked, when he could command his voice.

I made him acquainted with my promise to Bill, and informed him of the latter's fears.

"And you thought I wasn't aware of what was afoot, did you?" he said.

"Yes," I answered.

Vance sat silent for some time, musing. Then he remarked carelessly: "You'd better creep back into your nest, Tom. I'll let you know when they come."

But I declined to return to my bed. Instead, I dressed myself and resumed my seat by the window. The hours dragged slowly. One o'clock—two o'clock passed. Vance and I exchanged but few words, and those in cautious whispers. It was a dreary, nerve-trying vigil—for me, at least. The irksomeness of the darkness, cold and silence grew almost unbearable.

At last—after what seemed an age of weary waiting—Vance sharply pinched my arm, and leaned out of the window. After a half-minute spent in that position he drew in his head and uttered a warning “hist.” I remained absolutely motionless, listening intently—painfully. A faint, muffled sound, dull and apparently far away—the unmistakable sound of many hoof-beats upon soft earth—came to my ears. It gradually drew nearer, swelling in volume and rising in pitch; and, at last, was added to it the scream of straining saddle-leather, and the metallic jingle of bit and spur.

Beneath our window the cavalcade passed. A horse shied and snorted, and its rider muttered an oath in a voice barely audible. Not a form of man or beast could we distinguish; but there must have been twenty or more horses in the lot, judging from the sullen thunder of their hoof-beats and the time it took them to pass. How many riders there were we had no means of knowing.

Just beyond the granary the troop came to a halt. After a few moments of almost complete silence I heard someone fumbling at the fastenings of the stable door, and I nudged Vance. He replied by

grasping my arm and holding me firmly. Next came the sound of the door swinging upon its squeaking hinges. Someone was opening it, slowly and cautiously.

Again there was silence, for a full minute or more. Then a horse blundered in stepping over the sill—and brought up against the swinging door, with a rattling bang.

"That's old Charley." I whispered to Vance; "he always stumbles coming out the door."

My companion gave me a slight shake, thus admonishing me to keep still; but he made no reply in words.

As nearly as we could tell, the entire party then moved off down the road. The dull thud of hoofbeats gradually died out in the distance. Vance slowly arose, drew a deep breath and stretched his limbs.

"Let's go and see what they've done," he remarked.

He spoke in an ordinary tone of voice; and it was a relief to my strained senses—my tense nerves.

"What if they 've taken Kaintuck—what'll you do?" I asked.

"Follow them," he answered tersely.

We descended the stairs and passed out of doors. At the gate we came upon Bill Kirk, lantern in hand.

"Where's you fellers goin'?" he inquired in a surly, sleep-roughened tone.

"Out to the stable," Vance replied.

"What fer?"

"We heard a noise out there; and we're going to learn the cause of it."

"'Twasn't nothin' but ol' Charley," Bill grunted. "He's got a spell o' the colic; more'n likely. I heerd him kickin' 'round."

"He's kicked himself out of the stable, then," Vance laughed.

"Well," Bill grumbled, "you fellers needn't go out to see 'bout him; I'll 'tend to him."

"We'll accompany you," Vance said firmly.

Bill offered no further objections, but grumpily stumped toward the stable. We found the door open, hanging by one hinge, and old Charley's broken halter-strap dangling from the manger. He was gone. Kaintuck was peacefully munching hay in the rear stall.

Bill set the lantern upon the ground, clasped his hands over his stomach, bent double, and laughed till I was afraid he would have an apoplectic seizure. When his merriment had had full vent he straightened up, wiped his single eye, and gaspingly cried:

"Ol' Charley must 'ave had a mighty bad spell o' the colic this time, sure! He's broke his halter-strap an' gone—gone fer medicine, I reckon. Went in such a hurry he come purty near takin' the door with him. Don't see how he got loose an' out o' the stable, though—sick as *he* was!"

This last, with a serio-comic stare at Vance.

"Maybe he had help," the latter suggested soberly.

"Wouldn't wonder," Bill answered with equal solemnity, drawing down the corners of his big mouth

and opening his one eye very wide. "Le's mosey back to roost. No use to look fer him to-night. I'll find him down the road a piece in the mornin'; he won't go far."

We returned to the house and to bed, well satisfied with the turn affairs had taken.

CHAPTER VIII

IN the chill of the early dawn I was awakened by heavy, dragging footfalls upon the stairs leading up to our bedchamber. Startled from sound sleep, I popped up in bed, and at that moment Bill Kirk's frowsy head bobbed above the opening in the floor. Our eyes met. In the ghostly gray light his face looked drawn and haggard.

"Seems you don't *never* sleep no more, Tom," he said complainingly. "Can't never ketch you asleep, anyhow. Guess you must jest stick y'r head under y'r wing an' go through the motions o' sleepin'—like a pigeon. Some people claims to sleep with one eye open. That wouldn't do fer me; I wouldn't git no sleep at all. Only got one eye, you know. Vance awake?"

"Yes," the latter said in answer to Bill's query, rising upon his elbow. "What do you want, Kirk?"

"Want you," was the laconic rejoinder.

"Anything amiss?"—his features assuming an anxious expression of inquiry.

"Jest come up to ask you if you b'lieved in miracles," Bill replied, with a silly grin.

Chatham's countenance cleared, and he said laughingly: "Not in modern miracles, at any rate, Bill. Why?"

"Jest wanted to know. Guess you'll have to give in that the days o' miracles ain't over, though. Never

took much stock in miracles, myself, till this mornin'; but I'm converted."

"What has happened?"

"Jest what happened to Gid Norton. He——"

"Never mind the story, Bill!" Vance interrupted peevishly. "Tell what has happened."

"Can't do it till I've got red o' the burden o' the yarn."

"*Must* you tell it?"

"Yep—got to do it."

"Can't you wait? Won't it keep?"

"Nope," Bill replied, dropping upon a stool near the head of the stairs.

"Well, tell it, then—and in as few words as possible," Vance cried in a tone of irritation.

Bill began composedly, rolling his quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other:

"What happened to Gid Norton was like this: One winter—w'en Gid was a young man, an' a-livin' with his father down on Norton Ridge—the whole neighborhood got stirred up over ghost stories. People was seein' an' hearin' ghosts on all corners; an' some folks purty nigh went crazy over the thing.

"But Gid Norton didn't believe in ghosts—an' didn't make no bones o' sayin' so. A crowd o' young fellers—o' which Gid was one—was in the habit o' goin' 'cross the river, to the ol' brick church, to meetin'. Gid had a gal over on that side o' the jimcrank; an' he never come back home with the other fellers, but 'ld stay an' pull that gal o' his till 'most daylight. Her name was Lidy Davis; an' her hair was red as a fox's tail. Gid finally married 'er; an'

has been wishin' ever sence that the ghosts had carried him off fer keeps.

"But I must hurry up an' tell you how Gid was converted to a b'lief in spooks. Some way it got noised abroad that the boys, comin' back from church, had seen a ghost—not once, but several times. Seems they seen it right in the middle o' the river road—jest after they'd crossed the ferry at Hawksburg. An' it was the funniest ghost in all creation—nothin' more n'r less 'n a walkin' brush-heap.

"Gid asked some o' his cronies 'bout the tale that was 'goin 'round; an' they said it was so—said they'd seen the thing a number o' times. Told him a brush-heap as big's a haycock 'ld walk from one side o' the road to t'other, an' disappear in the bushes 'long the river bank—right b'fore the'r eyes. Said the thing seemed to jest slide 'cross the road, without makin' a mite o' noise.

"'An' what did you fellers do?' asked Gid.

"'Run,' they answers.

"'I'd jest like to come 'cross it once,' says Gid. 'Dang *me*, if I'll run!'

"Well," Bill continued, reflectively shaking his head, "he got to see it the very next Sunday night—to the sorrer of hisself an' the ruination of his best clo'es. He left off pullin' the fair Lidy earlier 'n usual that night—jest to git a chance o' runnin' 'cross that ghost. An' he run 'cross it; an' then it run *all over* him.

"It was a bright moonlight night—with a skip o' snow on the ground, an' frosty 'nough to make a fel-

ler's nose-holes feel stiff. Jest as Gid got to the place where the ghost had been seen, sure 'nough there it was—a great, big, black brush-heap movin' 'cross the road ahead of him.

“Gid give a look, an' a yell, an' a run-an'-jump, an' lit right on top o' the thing. He never could tell much 'bout what happened next. All that he ever knowed was that he was chawed an' clawed, an' scratched an' pounded—till his senses was knocked out o' him an' he didn't know nothin'.

“W'en he come to he was layin' on his back in the middle of the road—an' with hardly a dud on him. He was purty near dead w'en he got home; an' he wasn't fit to go sparkin' ag'in fer sever'l weeks. He never liked to talk much 'bout the matter. An' nobody could say fer certain what the thing was; an' it seemed nobody ever run onto it ag'in.”

He paused impressively; and cocked his solitary eye at Vance.

“But what was it, Bill—what was it?” I yelled excitedly.

“Don't know to a tee-wy-tee, Tom,” he grinned; “but I ruther guess it was ol' Cal Swanke's pet bear, that had got loose an' was runnin' round the country. The other boys had played it on Gid. They'd started the ghost-story jest to ketch him—knowin' he didn't b'lieve in spooks, an' was purty rash an' spunky; an' then on that partic'lar night they'd brung the bear there an' laid in wait fer Gid—knowin' what 'ld happen w'en he come along. An' Gid, havin' a brush-heap in his mind, saw a brush-heap—an' jumped onto it.”

Then, to Vance: "Now, I guess I'm ready to tell you what you want to know."

"Go on!" Vance replied impatiently.

"Well, ther' hain't nothin' happened, only I've run 'cross a miracle. Kaintuck's changed into ol' Charley. Turnin' water into wine was a purty slick trick; but turnin' one hoss into another is slicker, by a dern sight!"

Vance was already out of bed, and hurriedly scrambling into his clothing; and I was following his example.

"You mean what you say, Bill—that Kaintuck is gone, and old Charley back in the stable?" he asked sharply, his eyes flashing, his features hardening.

Kirk silently nodded.

A few minutes later the three of us were at the stable. Sure enough, Kaintuck had disappeared and the old drafthorse was back in his stall. Vance took a look—and a few agitated turns up and down the floor. Then he resolutely set his jaws, and strode rapidly toward the house. Bill and I followed him—wondering what was in his mind—what he meant to do.

We were not left long in doubt, however. On reaching the sitting-room Vance rushed up the stairs, leaving us by the fire. A moment later he came down, his long cape over his arm, his revolver in his hand. Dropping into a chair, he carefully looked to the priming of his weapon. Then he turned to me and said:

"Tom, I want you to go to the schoolhouse and tell the scholars there'll be no school to-day. Will you?"

"Uh-huh!" I gurgled, eyes and mouth wide open.

Without another word, he arose and started for the door.

"Say!" Bill ejaculated. "Where 're you goin', Chatham?"

"Going to bring back Kaintuck," was the frigid reply.

"You don't mean it!" gasped Bill. "You ain't thinkin' o' cuttin' no fool caper like that, are you?"

"I am,"—icily, his hand upon the doorlatch.

"Goin' to walk?"

"No, I'm going to ride Dick—the black gelding?"

"Who said you could?" Bill demanded, bristling.

Vance wheeled in his tracks and retorted fiercely—his eyes afire, his features frozen: "Not another word, Kirk! Nobody asked leave to *steal* Kaintuck; I'll not ask leave to *borrow* Dick."

Then he was off out the door, and it was shut behind him.

"Well, I'll be danged!" Bill exclaimed, clattering toward the kitchen, where Ruth and Tildy were preparing breakfast. "High-headedder 'n a hoss with a bur under his tail!"

I followed Vance to the stable. As he led out Dick saddled and bridled I ventured pleadingly—tears in my eyes:

"Please don't go, Vance! You may get hurt or—or killed!"

Laying a hand upon my shoulder, he smiled down at me—a forced smile intended for my assurance—and said kindly: "There! Don't worry, Tom! I'll

not get hurt—there's no danger of that. Don't neglect to go to the schoolhouse."

Just then Bill, closely followed by the two women, came rushing out from the house.

"Wait a minute, Chatham!" the excited fellow bellowed.

Vance already had his foot in the stirrup. He made a move to swing into the saddle, but hesitated. After a momentary indecision he settled back to the ground, and stood patting the gelding's glossy neck, his eyes downcast.

"Better wait an' git y'r breakfast," Bill panted as he drew near.

A negative shake of the head was the only reply to the suggestion.

Bill went on earnestly:

"Wouldn't think you'd be fool enough to go on such a wild goose chase, anyhow. There's no use o' bein' mealy-mouthed an' tryin' to hide things—now. You run a right smart chance o' losin' y'r life, an' don't stand no chance o' gittin' back y'r hoss. Them's 'bout the facts in the case."

Vance neither spoke nor changed his rigid attitude.

"You don't count y'r hoss worth more 'n y'r life, do you?" Bill persisted.

"He's *not my horse*."

At the words, Bill recoiled a step; his mouth flew open.

"Huh?" he gasped questioningly.

"Kaintuck's not mine," Vance repeated, his eyes still upon the ground.

"What d'you mean?" Bill asked faintly.

Turning and facing his questioner, Vance replied: "As you just said, Bill, this is no time to be mealy-mouthed—to harbor a fancied secret. Kaintuck doesn't belong to me, by right, though my father bought him and gave him to me. The horse was stolen from a farmer living on Sunday creek; George Simpson's his name, I think. Probably you know all this as well as I do. At any rate, I mean to recover the animal and, in due time, return him to his rightful owner—or pay the price of him."

"Tom, you've been blabbin'!" Bill cried reproachfully, his one eye fixed sternly upon me.

"No, sir! No, sir!" I screamed frantically, dancing up and down in stress of feeling. "I didn't tell you a thing—did I, Vance?"

With a word my comrade cleared me of the imputation. Utterly defeated, Bill turned on his heel and walked away a short distance. There he remained, his back toward us, his chin upon his breast. But distinctly I heard him mutter:

"If he ever gits Kaintuck back an' turns him over to ol' George Simpson, then the devil *will* be to pay?"

Ruth stood leaning against the gate, looking white and wretched. Tildy was at her side, staring blinkingly—striving to comprehend what was going on. Vance did not turn his gaze in Ruth's direction; but he was aware of her presence. I think he feared to meet her glance—feared the tears in her eyes would melt his stony resolve.

Of a sudden he sprang into the saddle, and set

off down the road at a brisk canter. Ruth's tearful gaze followed him; but she did not speak until he was some rods away. Then she cried plaintively—all her heart in the hopelessness of her voice.

“Wait a moment! *Please wait, Vance!*”

He reined in his horse; and, without turning his head, answered:

“Well, what is it, Ruth?”

“Wait!” she panted, running toward him.

Dick curveted and danced impatiently. His rider patted him and tried to soothe him; but still did not cast a look behind. Apparently he was giving his whole attention to his restive mount. Ruth reached his side, and, clinging to the stirrup-strap, moved with the prancing animal. I could not hear what passed between them; but I saw her pleading face upturned to him—I saw him frown and obstinately shake his head. And at that moment I almost hated him!

But she would not—she did not give up. From one side of the road to the other Dick jerked and dragged her. My heart was in my throat; I feared she would be thrown down and trampled. Several times Vance had to catch her arm to steady her. Tears were running down her cheeks; but his face remained set and firm. I wished that I were a man, that I might call him to account for his unfeeling obstinacy!

At last she loosened her hold on the stirrup-strap, reeled backward a few steps, and—reaching her arms toward him—sobbed appealingly:

“For my sake, Vance! *For my sake!*”

That was more than he could stand. He was out of the saddle and at her side in an instant. With his arm around her waist and her head upon his shoulder he stood supporting her, while convulsive sighs and sobs shook her slender form. Tenderly he bent and kissed her. His face was grave; his eyes were moist.

Slowly,—very slowly, they sauntered toward us, side by side. The bridle-rein hung over his free arm; and Dick quietly followed, his nose to the ground. Seemingly the restive rascal realized that he had behaved shamefully, and was greatly depressed over the thought of his misdoing.

Bill silently took Dick and returned him to the stable. For once in his life the voluble bumpkin had nothing to say. Tildy's eyes were red; and she had recourse to the corner of her apron, as we made our way back to the house.

Breakfast was a rather dismal affair. All of us were preoccupied and dejected, and we ate little. The meal over, Vance and I set out for the school-house, as usual. Little did we say to each other—and not a syllable on the subject that was engrossing the minds of both. I was wondering what member of the gang had brought back old Charley and taken Kaintuck, what part my father had played in it all, where Kaintuck was—and whether he would ever be restored to us. Also, I was wondering what Ruth had said to Vance, what he had said to her, what he would do in regard to the puzzling situation—what would be the final outcome. I was wondering all the way to school—and all day long!

Only a few years ago I learned from a reformed member of Shep Dickson's notorious gang—an old man now, tottering and feeble—just what occurred on that momentous night. It appears from the statement of this aged horse-thief that the facts are about as follows:

My father stoutly maintained his refusal to have anything to do with the theft of Vance's horse; and Shep—knowing well what stall Kaintuck had occupied—sent a young member of the gang to fetch him from the stable. The mistake made was not apparent until they were ferrying the stolen animals across the river, at Colby's furnace.

At the revelation my father stormed and swore lustily; but Shep dropped from his horse, rolled upon the ground, and roared with laughter. The absurdity of the situation irresistibly appealed to his sense of humor.

Marsh Colby was furious—as much at Shep's demonstrative mirth as at the fact that inadvertently Kaintuck had been left behind, and, mounting the bare back of one of the stolen horses, he instantly set out to exchange old Charley for the coveted prize. Like mad he galloped up the creek road, literally dragging the stiffened old draft horse by the halter-strap. How well he accomplished his purpose has been told.

Time softens the harsh aspect of evil deeds and events, as distance mellows the hard outlines of a craggy landscape. As the old horse-thief, now a respectable citizen, gazed back along the dim vista of the years to the sunken horizon of his young man-

hood, and told me of the scenes I have just described, he laughed heartily—tears trickling down his wrinkled visage and his toothless jaws quivering.

My father returned home about noon, mud-bespattered and fagged. On his arrival Ruth called him aside and said:

“Father, Kaintuck’s gone.”

At the same time she fastened her eyes upon his face, as though she were striving to peep into the inmost recesses of his soul. He was visibly disturbed, and could not meet her steadfast gaze. He coughed and mumbled, and failed to make an intelligible answer.

“Kaintuck’s gone,” she repeated slowly and impressively, still keenly observing him.

“What!” he exclaimed, doing his best to manifest surprise and concern.

Ruth kept her eyes steadily fixed upon him, but offered no reply to his exclamation.

“You don’t mean what you say, do you?” he asked, nervously twirling his thumbs and striving to appear incredulous.

“I do,” she answered curtly.

“Did—did Chatham sell him?”

“No.”

“You don’t mean to tell me the hoss got out o’ the stable an’ run away?”

“I do not. He was taken from the stable, and was run away.”

“Oh, you’re mistaken, Ruth! You’re talkin’ foolishness.”

He had so far recovered his composure that he

indulged in one of his big sneering horse laughs. But Ruth was not disconcerted, nor was she to be moved from her purpose.

"I am not mistaken," she answered quietly. "Kaintuck was stolen from the stable last night."

"Pshaw!" he sneered. "What put such a silly notion into y'r head?"

"It's not a silly notion—it's not a notion at all; it's a *fact*," she said positively.

"How d'you know?"—a ring of suspicion in his voice.

"Well, I—know," she returned with tantalizing deliberation and confidence. "And I know more than I've told you."

"I s'pect you know a heap."

He tried to laugh lightly, but made a dismal failure of the attempt.

"I *do*," she asserted positively.

"Out with it, then!" he cried angrily. "I hain't got no time to be foolin'—n'r be made a fool *of*. Go on—an' say what you've got to say."

"Kaintuck was stolen after three o'clock this morning," Ruth calmly pursued. "The thieves—whoever they were—made a mistake, taking old Charley instead of Kaintuck. Then, an hour later, one of them returned old Charley and took Kaintuck."

John Gaston's countenance went white, then red; and he coughed behind his hand, to hide his confusion.

"That's a likely tale!" he muttered sarcastically.

"It'd be a reg'lar fool that 'ld take ol' Charley fer Kaintuck. Yes, that's a likely tale!"

"Nevertheless, it's true," Ruth stoutly maintained. "Bill had changed the horses in their stalls."

"I don't believe a word of it!" he blustered. "Bill had changed the hosses in the'r stalls! A purty story, that is! Look here, my young lady! Answer me a few questions. Did Chatham *see* anybody steal his hoss?"

"No, I think not," Ruth admitted candidly.

"Did he see anybody steal ol' Charley?"

She shook her head.

"N'r Bill, n'r Tom didn't see nothin' o' the kind?"

"No," Ruth replied, "but all three of them *heard* the robbers, when they were at the stable the first time."

"Heard 'em, did they?" he snorted scornfully. "What did they hear 'em do?"

"They heard horsemen ride past the house——"

"That don't prove they was hoss-thieves! People rides past the house 'most ev'ry night."

"Heard them stop beyond the granary——"

"Passel o' stock drovers, more 'n likely; an' stopped to let the'r cattle rest. Well, go on."

"And heard the stable door open——"

"Some one of 'em had bu'sted a girth, an' was huntin' fer a strap 'r thong, likely as not. Anything else?"

"And," Ruth completed, "when the three went out to the stable old Charley was gone."

"Huh!" my father grunted contemptuously. "A nice hoss-stealin' yarn, I must say! W'y, whoever

went into the stable fergot an' left the door open; an' ol' Charley—wantin' to foller the other hosses—broke loose an' got out. Was his halter-strap broke 'r untied?"

"It was broken," Ruth replied simply.

"Jest as I thought!" my father declared triumphantly. "Then someone comin' past found the hoss, an' put him back in the stable. But the hinge o' the door bein' broke—I saw it myself—it wouldn't stay shut; an' that give Chatham's hoss a chance to git out. It's all as plain as the nose on a man's face."

"Where do you think Kaintuck is, father?" Ruth asked, once more fixing her brown eyes full upon his face—to his evident embarrassment.

"How should I know?" he growled. "S'pect he's browsin' 'long the road som'eres. Did Chatham go an' look fer him?"

"No."

"Why didn't he?"—a ring of suspicion again in his voice.

"I wouldn't let him."

"You wouldn't let him?"

She nodded gravely, her lips tightly closed.

"*You!*"

Again she inclined her head.

"W'y—w'y, what the devil had *you* to do with his business?" he sputtered fiercely. "An' why wouldn't you let him go an' hunt his hoss?"

"I didn't want him to kill somebody; I didn't want him to become a murderer!"

He started back, his eyes wavering, his fingers

and features working. But pulling himself together, with an effort, he managed to say haltingly:

"I don't—don't understand what you mean, Ruth?"

"Yes, father," she replied, shaking a taper finger at him, "you understand well what I mean. Now, I want to know where Kaintuck is!"

"What makes you ask me 'bout the hoss?"—surlily.—"I——"

"Because you know where he is."

"I don't!"

"But you do!"

He stood savagely glaring at her for a full minute, his big hands clenched, his muscles rigid. But she did not quail. Instead, she tossed a stray lock of silken hair from her flushed brow, and repeated:

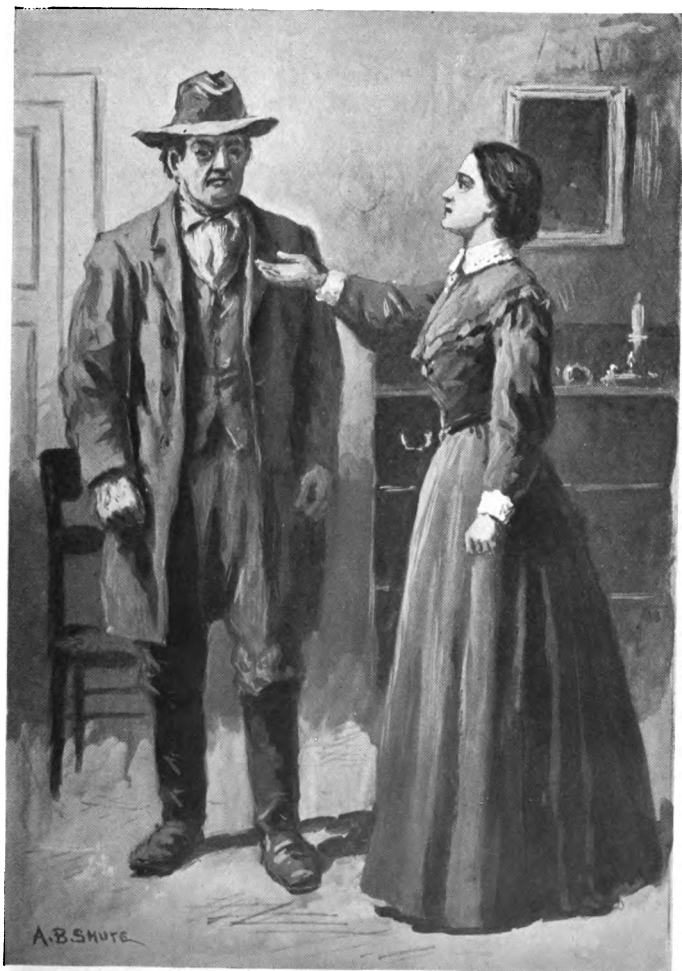
"Father, where—is—Kaintuck?"

"I tell you I don't know," rumbled up from his throbbing throat.

"And I tell you you *do* know!" she insisted.

"How do you know that I know?" he questioned, attempting to curl his tremulous lip in a sneer.

"I'll tell you how I know, John Gaston!" she cried, defiantly throwing back her head and resting her hands upon her shapely hips. "I was abroad last night—on the watch. I was behind the granary when you and your gang rode up. I heard your voice declaring you wouldn't help to take Kaintuck from the stable. I was still there when old Charley was led out, and when Marsh Colby came to make the exchange of horses I was in the barn. I could have put my hand upon his shoulder as he untied



“ Father, — where — is — Kaintuck ? ”

the horse. I know all—much more than you dream of!”

John Gaston was alarmed, terrified. His flabby features were tallow-white, his arms hung limp, his hands trembled. But, assuming a pitiful air of weak bravado, he cried:

“Well, what of it? What ’re you goin’ to do ’bout it?”

“Just this!” Ruth made answer—and her voice had the ring of firm resolve. “If Kaintuck isn’t back in his stall by to-morrow morning, I’ll ride to Malconta and tell the sheriff all I know!”

“You—you won’t *dare* to do that!” he shouted hoarsely, lurching forward and gripping her arm.

“I will!”

“If you try it, I’ll—I’ll——”

He raised his fist threateningly. Fury gleamed in his burning eyes and choked his voice in his throat. The murderous intent in his mind was reflected in his brutal face. But Ruth—though deathly pale, and frightened and faint—did not recoil, did not falter in her resolve.

“As sure as there’s a God, father,” she answered bravely, “if you don’t bring back Kaintuck, I’ll send you to the penitentiary!”

And she unflinchingly met the insane gleam in his eyes.

He loosed his grip upon her arm and staggered back. Wonder, fear, awe, admiration—all were mirrored in his countenance as he stood looking at her.

“W’y, Ruth!” he said. “You wouldn’t do such a thing as that!”

She gave a barely perceptible nod, her brows contracted, her lips set.

"The hoss ain't in my keepin'," he muttered peevishly.

"You can get him."

She felt that she was gaining the ascendancy, and color came back to her face—courage to her heart.

"But maybe I can't," he objected.

"You must."

"But if I can't?"

"*You must!*"

For a few seconds he was morosely silent. Then he inquired: "How much does Chatham know?"

"Everything, I guess. He knows that Kaintuck was first stolen from old George Simpson."

This shot leveled the last stone of John Gaston's wall of defense. Promptly he flung out the white flag of surrender. It was pitiful to see the change that came over him. The last vestige of braggadocio deserted him; abject terror and cowardice took possession of him. Excess of alcohol had weakened his nerves—his sense of proportion—his will-power; and he fell a victim to his own exaggerated sense of danger.

"Ruth," he murmured falteringly, dropping his eyes to the floor, "if Kaintuck's back in the stable in the mornin', all safe an' sound, will you shut Chatham's mouth? Will you? Can you?"

"I'll do what I can," she promised.

"Do you think you can?"—in evident anxiety. She nodded stiffly.

"Do y'r best, Ruth—do y'r best!" he whispered agitatedly, his terror increasing with the passing seconds. "I'm worried to death. I hain't been in the business long; an' this is the last haul fer any of us. Shep an' all of us is goin' to quit it; it's too resky. I'll bring Kaintuck back, Ruth; an' you're to keep still—an' to help to keep others still. Is that the bargain?"

"Yes," she whispered softly.

The tense strain over, she felt weak and giddy.

Seeing immediate danger receding to the background, my father so far regained his courage that he remarked—with a show of his wonted hardihood and arrogance:

"Ther's one other thing that needs settlin' 'fore we close this bargain, my little gal."

"What is it?" Ruth inquired in a feeble voice, dropping into a chair.

"W'y, this," he replied: "'Fore I say fer certain that I'll bring Kaintuck back, you've got to promise me that you'll marry Marsh Colby."

"Never!" she returned, fixed determination in voice and attitude.

"Don't be too hasty, now," he said wheedlingly; "wait till you've heard all I've got to say. You know a good 'eal 'bout my affairs, I'll own up; but ther's some things 'bout y'r own affairs that you don't know, little gal,"—patting her cheek in a grotesque attempt at pleasantry—"I s'pect you think I'm y'r re'l father, an' that Tom is——"

She shook her head, her gaze directed to the floor, as she interrupted:

"I'm aware that my father and mother are dead; that you are my uncle and guardian, and that you have legal charge of me and my property till I'm of age."

"Who told you all that?" he inquired.

"Many persons have hinted things to me; but Granny Watson told me these facts."

"You think they are facts, then?"

"Yes."

"An' that's all you know?"

"It is."

"Well, what you've heard from Granny Watson's so; though I can't imagine where the ol' hag learnt it. But I've got more to tell you."

"I don't care to hear it now,"—sighing wearily.

"It don't make no difference whether you want to 'r not," he said doggedly; "you've got to."

And he went on, informing her of her parents, of her father's death, of his strange will—while she sat with her slim fingers interlocked in her lap, and unshed tears of nervous wretchedness in her eyes.

In conclusion he said positively—as though his expressed desire settled everything: "Of course I want you to marry Marsh Colby, 'r I wouldn't ask you to do it; an' of course you'll do it, seein' it's the only sensible thing to do."

He stopped short, and flung up his head expectantly.

"I'll never marry him," was the low-voiced but firm reply.

"The devil you won't!"—angrily. "Surely you

ain't fool enough to throw away y'r own fortune—
an' make me lose mine, jest to be c'ntrary, gal?
There ain't no two ways 'bout it; you've *got* to
marry the feller I want you to—the man o' my
choice. The will says so."

"Why can't you make a different choice?"

"Jest 'cause I can't, that's why. I've promised
you to Marsh."

"You've promised me to Marsh!"—scornfully.

"Where did you get the power—the right to prom-
ise me to *anybody*, John Gaston?"

"Got it from y'r daddy's will!" he cried trium-
phantly. "I'm y'r guardian; the law backs me."

She sprang to her feet—her listlessness, her calm-
ness, gone on the instant. Latent power was in every
graceful sinuosity of her beautiful form; latent rage
was in her brown eyes.

Stamping her foot, she said passionately: "You'd
dispose of me as you'd dispose of a horse or a bag
of grain, would you, John Gaston—for your own
advantage? Well, you won't! That for the law—
and you, too!"—And she defiantly snapped her fin-
gers in his face.—"I'll marry the man of my choice
—property or no property! Now, go and bring
back Kaintuck; and don't you ever mention Marsh
Colby's name to me again!"

"I s'pose you mean you're goin' to marry the Ken-
tucky dandy, Mr. Vance Chatham," he said with a
snarling sneer.

"If he'll have me—*yes*," she answered boldly;
but the red mantled her face.

"Well," he returned with a malignant grin,

"sence you've got so smart, I guess Kaintuck can stay right where he is."

"And you can go to the penitentiary!"

It was a well-aimed thrust, and it went home. Again that look of cringing cowardice, and abject fear crept into his face. Without attempting a reply, he lumbered from her presence.

When Vance and I returned in the evening my father was not to be found about the place; but the next morning he was asleep in his bed—and Kaintuck was in the stable.

From that day John Gaston was a changed man. A woman—a mere child in years—had outgeneraled him, conquered him; and a sense of his defeat preyed upon his mind. He had been inclined to moodiness; now he was gloom personified. He had been uncommunicative; now he was silence itself. He had been a steady drinker for years; but from this time on he simply saturated body and soul with fiery liquor. Then, too, he had an unmanly fear of Marsh Colby—strange as it may seem; and lived in constant dread of the giant's violent temper. Marsh frequently came by, called my father out to the road, and stormed like a winter tempest—threatening what he would do, what exposures he would make, if Ruth did not consent to marry him. And all my father could do was to cower and tremble, and enter the truthful plea that he could not influence the willful young woman. Poor man! He was fast becoming an alcoholic wreck—a pitiable paretic imbecile.

Ruth, some months after the occurrence, detailed to me all that passed between her and my father in

that fateful interview, and with histrionic fidelity acted the parts of both characters. But that was after our skies had cleared, and our hearts were alight with the sunshine of hope.

To add to my father's disquietude and troubles, great turmoil and excitement followed Shep Dickson's last raid—for it was his last raid. The black-bearded captain never returned to his native haunts; and Colby, my father, and other members of the notorious clan never received a penny from the disposal of the last lot of horses. In addition, Shep's sudden disappearance and prolonged absence served to fix suspicion upon his associates—the last of whom he had sent back when the animals were safe across the Ohio river. For days a sheriff's posse and bands of enraged farmers scoured the country. Of course they did not find the lost chattels; and, as positive proof upon which the perpetrators of the bold crime could be convicted was unobtainable, the quest was at last abandoned, and quietude and security again reigned. Luckily those that came to our place did not know Kaintuck.

But fear of treacherous exposure was in the heart of every member of the disbanded gang; and dread of summary justice made cowards of them all.

John Gaston rarely left his premises in daylight, or ventured beyond his own dooryard at night. But one thing could induce him to travel the public highway: his insatiate thirst for liquor; and finally, owing to morbid timidity, he got to sending Bill to the Coon tavern to have the black jug refilled. The poor wretch was a prey to unreasoning terror; and as he

shuffled clumsily about the house and yard he mumbled to himself and peered furtively to right and left—constantly expecting some lurking danger to assail him, and starting guiltily at every unusual sight or sound.

He was a mere shadow of his big virile self. His clothes hung loosely upon his shrunken limbs; his shriveled skin lay in folds and wrinkles. He took little nourishment; whisky was his food and drink. Except when profoundly under its influence, he could neither sleep nor rest, and he was ever on the verge of *mania a potu*. Debauched mortal! His worst enemy could have wished him no further punishment! And he was my father!

CHAPTER IX

THE storm—still recalled as one of the most severe that ever visited the section of country—set in Monday night, and for forty-eight hours raged uninterruptedly. During all that time the wind blew straight and steady from the northwest, piercing and keen, and bearing blinding clouds of snowflakes that swirled and eddied and found their way into every crack and cranny. At first, moist and heavy, they clung to any object they chanced to touch; and the chill breath of the gale soon hardened them into an icy coat of mail for the protection of the shivering, shuddering earth. Soon, however, the rapidly falling temperature wrung all moisture out of them; and they came down big, feathery and noiseless—or, rolled into small frozen pellets, they dropped like shot from the black heavens.

It was the first big storm of the winter; and, as is common, many dilatory farmers were caught napping, caught with their stock unsheltered, their fodder still in the field, and their woodyards empty. Not so with Bill Kirk, the diminutive and voluble—but the watchful and energetic! He had everything in shipshape for any tempest that might come roistering by.

It was a silent, sheeted world that presented itself at daylight on Thursday morning. The gale had spent its force and died out. The snow had

ceased to fall; the storm was past. But an endless reach of snowy waste stretched away in all directions. The landscape was dead and shrouded, and the mourning trees, white-robed and motionless, stood with proud heads bowed. Floating hoar-frost needles filled the air—glistening icemotes in the rays of the returning sun.

The snow lay two feet deep on the level, and along the hillsides and highway it was piled in huge, fantastic heaps and shapes.

During the two days that the polar storm lasted Vance and I did not attempt to go to the schoolhouse, knowing there would be no one there; but on Thursday morning—just two days before Christmas—we screwed up our courage and resolutely set forth. It was slavish, painful work. To use Bill's expression: "We took one step for'ard an' slipped back two." There was little wind; but the temperature was far below zero, and the dense air, gently stirring, cut like a knife.

Vance took the lead, and I floundered along in his wake. Bill had shoveled a path, before daylight, from the house to the barn and other farm-buildings. For that short distance we had easy going; but beyond the marks of Bill's early industry lay hard toil, and an abundance of it.

I had a fur cap pulled low over my ears, a long red comforter swathed around my neck, and a pair of my father's cast-off woolen socks drawn on over my cowhide boots. In addition, my hands were encased in clumsy mittens; and my body, in one of Bill's heavy pea-jackets. As a consequence, my limbs

were cumbrous and unwieldy; and I rolled and wallowed like a rudderless ship in the trough of the sea.

Vance had his ample cloak closely clasped about him; but he disdained both mittens and comforter. And when he took my hand to assist me through the deepest drifts I could feel the delicious warmth of his hot, pulsing blood. What a strong heart—what a bounding circulation the active, self-reliant fellow had!

When we reached the crest of the ridge, panting and distressed, the teeth of the icy breeze nipped us sharply. Deep inspiration gave me agony; and my breath became short and labored. I whimpered, and began to lag, but, with a cheery word of encouragement, Vance took my hand and hurried me along. One of his exposed ears turned frosty-white, and I called his attention to it. Without slackening his rapid pace he caught up a handful of snow and vigorously rubbed the freezing member.

On reaching the schoolhouse he set me to running up and down the floor, while he hastily built a fire. I whiningly demurred; but he shook me roughly and gave me to understand that I must obey. At first I could hardly drag one benumbed limb after the other, but soon the blood began to circulate its chilled courses, and I moved more freely. Then fingers, ears and toes commenced to ache, and I blubbered outright. Oh, how I suffered!

By that time the fire was going. The flames crackled and roared in the cavernous chimney, and sent their genial warmth radiating throughout the room. I eagerly drew near the hearth; but Vance

quickly hustled me away, removed my manifold wraps and coverings, pulled off my boots, and rubbed me energetically—not to say savagely.

I sobbingly complained of the ill-usage; and, frowning, he said in a tone of irritation:

“Hush, Tom! I know what’s good for you. You ought to be ashamed to cry; you’re too big. I don’t like twelve-year-old babies!”

I was ashamed, instantly, and very angry—displeased with myself and angered at Vance. I tightly closed my mouth and did my best to stifle the sobs in my throat. But in spite of my heroic endeavors, a deep sighing respiration occasionally shook my frame. Vance gave no heed, however. He ordered me to draw on my boots and allowed me to approach the fire.

When finally I was restored to comfort and good humor, I remarked meekly:

“Vance, I am ashamed of myself. But I—I couldn’t help it; it hurt so bad.”

“I know, Tom,” he answered, nodding; “you were almost frozen. But weeping neither eased your pain nor helped you out of your troubles. It never does. It’s all well enough for girls and women to cry; it’s their nature. But for men and boys—never! When anything hurts me, Tom, or opposes my desires, I get mad—and set in to remove the cause of my trouble. It may not be the best way; but it’s the only way—for me. At any rate, it’s better than weakly sitting down and shedding tears. But you are all right!”—fondly chucking me in the ribs. “I think it’s the first time I ever saw you cry. You’re a

pretty sturdy youngster,"—with another caressing and comforting pat. "I'll make a man of you yet."

The smile on his face was good to see; and I believed all he said.

But few scholars came to school that day; and no others as young as I. In spite of the huge heap of logs and sticks in the big fireplace, the temperature of the room persisted in remaining far below the point of comfort. The three or four girls present wore their wraps all day long; and the half score of boys sat with their hands in their pockets or pressed into their armpits, and with their coat collars turned up. With shrugged shoulders and chattering teeth they stoically conned their lessons—too stupid and miserable to have a thought of mischief. Ice froze in the water pail sitting upon the hearth, and diners had to be thawed out ere they could be eaten.

The day dragged its endless length along. Lessons were poorly learned and balkingly recited. At the noon hour two or three of the hardier lads went out to play; but soon they were glad to return to the fire. With our noses pressed to the cold window panes, where we had breathed clear spaces, we gazed disconsolately out upon the pale, dead world. What a lonesome, trying day it was!

Vance dismissed school early. As I was passing from the chilly air within to the frigid atmosphere without, I heard Mart Vaughn—a fifteen-year-old boy living in the immediate vicinity of the Coon tavern—whisper to a companion:

"I'm goin' to hurry right home. Ther's three niggers shut up in our smokehouse. Dave Ryal an'

Saul Glaspy brung 'em there last night. They'll come an' take 'em away as soon as it's dark. I want to git another look at 'em 'fore they're gone."

I thought little of the remark at the time, such occurrences were common; but I soon had occasion to recall my schoolmate's words. For just as Vance and I reached home and were passing into the yard, three horsemen came riding down the highway. They were bundled up to the eyes; and, as their horses came plunging and plowing through the deep drifts that blocked the road, a cloud of snow rose and almost hid them from our view.

My comrade and I paused momentarily, to learn who it was that had the hardihood to venture forth in such weather—and along such an unbroken and treacherous track. They rapidly approached us; and soon one of them waved a hand and sent us a muffled halloo.

"You go on in to the fire and thaw out, Tom," Vance suggested. "I'll wait and see who they are, and what they want."

But, although I was suffering keenly, curiosity held me to the spot. Soon the three riders arrived opposite the gate and reined in their horses. The distressed animals were rime-covered and gaunt-appearing; and they stood with heads low and limbs and flanks quivering. I recognized one of the men—in spite of the fact that I could see only his nose and eyes—as the deputy-sheriff from Malconta; and at once I was assailed with dread of what his presence might portend. He relieved me by saying briskly:

"Good-evening. We don't want to keep you fellows out in the cold; just want to ask if you've seen anything of three runaway negroes we've been tracking. We know they're in this neighborhood; but we can't locate 'em."

Vance replied: "I haven't seen or heard of them. You say you've tracked them into this neighborhood?"

"Yes, tracked 'em in here yesterday evening; and they haven't got away yet—I'm sure of that much. I think Dave Ryal and Saul Glaspy has 'em in tow. A couple of sly old foxes!"

"Well, the poor black fools 'll freeze, if they lie out to-night," Vance remarked, fetching a sympathetic shiver at the thought.

"That's right."—And the deputy-sheriff nodded gravely.—"But we can't look no further fer 'em to-night; it'll be dark 'fore we get back to town, now. You haven't seen or heard anything of 'em, have you, my boy?"

And he eyed me sharply, I thought.

"No, sir—no, sir!" I hastened to say. "I haven't seen 'em."

Vance gave me a searching look that caused me to squirm uneasily; but he said nothing.

"Well, let's be moving, fellows," the deputy-sheriff grunted impatiently, shrugging his shoulders and shaking the rein.

One of the other two men had been closely scrutinizing Vance's features for some time. Now he spurred his horse up to the gate, and, putting forth a gloved hand, said with a short laugh:

"Give me a wag of your paw, Vance Chat-ham. What are you doing in this God-forsaken place? "

"Jim Irving!" Vance exclaimed; but I noticed that he ignored the extended hand. "I didn't recognize you, bundled up as you are. Some of your niggers have run off, eh? "

"Yes," the man replied, settling back in the saddle and slowly dropping his hand to his side; "three of 'em. But I'll take 'em back home with me, or I'll leave 'em dead among these infernal hills. I'll not come 'way up here and ride all over God's creation in such damned cold weather for nothing. But it's too cold to talk out here; and we haven't time to go in to the fire. You haven't told me what you're doing, though."

"Teaching school."

"Where? "

"Back on the hills," and Vance indicated the direction with a jerk of his thumb.

"Maybe I'll get to see you to-morrow, then; I'll be up in here again. I want to have a talk with you, if you don't mind. I think I can make you see things in a different light, by this time."

The speaker paused expectantly; but Vance, stiffly erect and frigidly calm, deigned no reply.

Irving leaned forward until his iron-gray mustache, stiff with rime, almost touched Vance's cheek, and said in a whisper:

"Nellie hasn't changed her mind; and my offer's still open. I'll see you to-morrow. Good-night!"

The three then put spurs to their jaded beasts

and rode away, and Vance and I hurried to the house.

As we sat warming ourselves by the fire, preparatory to helping with the evening chores, I said to him:

“Who was he, Vance?”

I spoke in an undertone, for my father sat dozing in the chimney corner, his rum-laden breath apparent throughout the room. Vance made no answer.

Thinking he had not heard my question, I repeated: “Who was he, Vance?”

“You heard his name—Jim Irving,” was the whispered reply. “His place adjoins ours. He owns both now.”

“And your slaves?”

“Some of them.”

“And your stock?”

He nodded, glancing apprehensively at the huddled figure whose stertorous breathing filled the apartment.

“You don’t like the man, Vance,” I hazarded.

“N—o,” he said slowly, in a soft whisper that I could barely catch—and as if communing with himself, “I don’t like him. He led my father into bad habits—he ruined him; he broke my mother’s heart—he robbed me.”

“Tell me about it—won’t you, Vance?” I requested, my heart fluttering.

“There’s little to tell, Tom,” he answered sadly. “It’s the old, old story of human weakness, appetite and passion. My father and Jim Irving were neigh-

bors; they became boon companions. My father was passionate and impetuous; Irving, cold and calculating. The stronger will gained the ascendancy over the weaker. My father could not take a dram—and stop; he could not lose one hundred dollars on a game of chance—and quit. He died impoverished—a drunkard, a gambler—who had been a wealthy and honorable man, a faithful husband, a loving father. Jim Irving persistently took advantage of my father's weakness. He won his money at cards, fleeced him in every way, ruined him—utterly ruined him, body and soul! No, I don't like Jim Irving!"—The intensity of his feeling rendered his whispered words sharply audible—"I hate him—hate him with a just and righteous hate! I would have killed him before I left Kentucky—had I not promised my dying mother that I would not!"

I was shocked—terribly shocked and grieved. I felt faint—nauseated. My face must have mirrored my mental turmoil, for Vance put an arm around me and whispered softly—tenderly:

"I did wrong to tell you, Tom, I know. You're too young, too sympathetic; you oughtn't to hear such things. But I felt as if I must unbosom myself to someone. And you're my comrade—boy though you are; so, in a moment of weakness, I told you. Try to forget all about it; it's all past and gone, anyway. I don't know what made me do such a thoughtless thing. Forgive me, Tom. I've seen you sturdily bearing your burden, the disgrace that has fallen upon you——"

His voice trembled slightly, and with a jerk of

his head in my father's direction he came to an abrupt stop.

I gulped down the lump in my throat, and manfully strove to hold in check my rising emotion. I knew now why he had so attracted me, why I had so readily yielded to that attraction. Our cases were similar. But his father had been an honorable man, while mine could not lay claim to common honesty! Yet, for some obscure reason, I considered Vance's case much the sadder. I sincerely pitied him, and tears of sympathy blurred my sight and trickled down my cheeks.

"Let's go out and help Bill with the chores, Tom," he said, rising.

"But who's Nellie?" I asked, mopping my eyes with the back of my hand.

"You overheard what Jim Irving whispered to me, did you?"

"Yes."

"Well, Nellie's his daughter, his only child—an estimable young woman. It's almost incredible that she should have sprung from such a father; still, the lily springs from the black muck of the swamp."

He looked thoughtful and restlessly patted his foot upon the hearth.

"What did the man mean by saying that Nellie had not forgotten and that his offer was still open, Vance?" I inquired breathlessly, a harrowing suspicion dawning in my mind.

He placed his hands upon the back of the chair from which he had risen, and, leaning over it, laughed softly: "Trust your sharp ears for hearing it all,

Tom! But I won't explain anything more. A shrewd rascal like you ought to be able to guess at some things."

"And I can," I broke in eagerly.

"Indeed! What's your guess?"

"That Nellie Irving loves you, that——"

He shook his head and made a grab for me, but I eluded his grasp and continued:

"That her father likes you, and wants you to marry her; and that he offers you your property back, if you will."

He attempted no denial of my interpretation of Jim Irving's words; but, shaking a finger at me, said sternly: "That's enough—that will do, Tom! You're bordering on impertinence."

Then, in a softened tone: "But again I'm to blame; I led you up to it. Come on, now. Bill will freeze, doing all the chores himself."

On our way to the barn we met Tildy returning to the house, a heavy shawl pinned over her head, and bearing a brimming pail of milk in each hand. I had to laugh at the comical figure she cut—waddling from side to side of the narrow path, and catching her breath with a little screech every time her feet slipped.

We found Bill foddering the cows. Above the breezy rustle of dry blades and stalks rose his voice, singing:

"Le's pause in life's journey
An' count its blessin's o'er,
While we all sup sorer with the poor;
Ther's a form that has lingered
Ferever 'round our door—
Oh, hard times, come ag'in no more!"

I scampered up the ladder to the dusty mow and threw down hay for the horses, while Vance brought them corn from the granary. Then he returned to the house to get in the firewood; and I stood clapping my mittened hands—awaiting further orders from Bill.

“Tom,” that eccentric said, jerking off his coon-skin gloves, holding them between his knocking knees, and vigorously blowing upon his benumbed fingers, “it’s colder ’n—whoo-o!—the r’ception—whoo-o!—the good Lord—whoo-o!—gives to hypocrites!”

He hastily replaced his gloves, and, picking up the pitchfork he had dropped, continued:

“Greenland’s icy mountains ain’t no c’mparison! Must be sixty degrees below freezo. Wish we had one o’ them tomthumbeters—I guess that’s what you call ’em; jest like to know how cold it re’ly is. Puts me in mind o’ the ’xperience an uncle o’ mine had on a trappin’ trip up North, back in the twenties. Said it got so cold it froze the smoke in his pipe-stem; an’ he had to keep it bored out with a gimlet. An’ my uncle was like George Washin’ton: he couldn’t tell a lie—not a decent-sized one, anyhow. But ev’ry feller has his failin’s; an’ ev’ry feller has his ups an’ downs—’specially a well-digger.

“I know a good joke on that uncle o’ mine; an’ I want to tell it to you, Tom. He was a great hand to argyfy; purty nigh as bad as ol’ Wilkes Biddison—an’ he argied whether a hoss drinks water up ’r down, while his house was on fire. An’ after his ol’ shack was in ashes, he set down an’ argied that it had

burnt up an' hadn't burnt down. Seems to me he was jest a l-e-e-tle cantankerous.

"But you couldn't foller my uncle's argyments a bit more 'n you could foller a mouse through a crib o' ear-corn. He lived at Coopertown durin' his latter days. It re'ly wasn't no town—jest a wide place in the country road; but my uncle——"

"Bill, I'm cold," I broke in, shrugging my shoulders and screwing my features into a knot.

"No colder 'n I am, I reckon," he growled testily; "an' I've got the story to tell. You hain't got nothin' to do but stand an' listen. Now shut up—an' don't bother me no more; you made me lose my place.

"As I was a-sayin', my uncle was a mighty hand to argyfy. He'd argy that the half o' thirteen was eight; an' he'd prove it by the 'rithmetic, too. W'y——"

"But, Bill, I'm *awful* cold!" I whined, noisily clumping about the barn floor.

"Well, what of it!" he snapped angrily. "Bein' cold ain't a-goin' to spile y'r beauty. Y'r fingers an' toes 'll feel good—after they've quit hurtin'. Dang a boy that can't keep still a minute! Jest be patient a half-hour 'r so, till I git through with this yarn, an' then you can help me to bed down the hosses an' carry corn to the hogs.

"As I started in to tell you, my uncle——"

"Bill, I'm going to the house," I declared, making a dive for the door.

"Well, I'll be dad-swizzled!" he ejaculated, rubbing his chin and staring after me.

Then he called lustily: "Hold on a second, Tom!"

I stopped just outside the door, and he came out to me. With sorrowful mien and injured air he said—droning the words through his nose:

"Tom, you've hurt my feelin's mighty bad. But, mind you, I ain't blamin' you. You're too young, 'r too dang simple—an' in either case you ain't r'sponsible—to know a good thing w'en you run 'cross it. But you've hurt my feelin's th' worst you ever did. An' I wasn't goin' to keep you but a few minutes; jest wanted to tell you that good joke on my uncle, an' how he argied hisself into a spell o' fever. You see the way of it was——"

He broke off abruptly and fixed his one eye upon the roof of the granary. Perched gingerly upon the comb of the building was a large fat turkey.

"Drat that tom-turkey, anyhow!" Bill exclaimed wrathfully, in his anger and excitement forgetting his grievance against me—and his itching desire to inflict upon me the mythical tale of his argumentative uncle.

"A sheep hain't got *much* sense," he went on grumblingly, kicking around in the snow in a vain effort to dislodge a stick or stone to fire at the offending fowl; "it'll lay with its back down hill an' die—without ever tryin' to flop over an' git up. Jest lay there an' bl'at an' bl'at—an' finally give up the ghost. But a turkey hain't got half as much sense as a sheep. All through the warm weather that tom would roost in the barn—cuddled up under the fan-nin'-mill; but now—w'en it's cold enough to freeze the ears off'n a brass kittle—he's gone to roost up there.

Likely to git his feathers all blowed off 'fore mornin', too—the 'tarnal fool! Ther' ain't but one thing in all creation that's got littler sense 'n a turkey; an' that's a *boy*. Take a boy 'bout ten 'r twelve years old, 'an he hain't got *no* sense."—He gave me a withering look of disgust.—“A boy o' that age alluz wants to shed his ol' boots 'fore grass sprouts in the spring, an' wants to commence wearin' his new ones 'fore the frost has turned the leaves yellor in the fall.”

He was so pleased with his own philosophizing that his rugged features spread in a broad, self-satisfied grin.

“Guess you may git down the turkey, Tom,” he remarked; “I'll go and do up the rest o' the chores. You'd better go out to the woodyard an' git an arm-load o' clubs.”

I dislodged the perverse fowl and drove it into the barn. Bill carried out his intention of finishing the chores.

Just as we completed our tasks—it was quite dark and Ruth had called us to supper—David Ryal rode up, coming from the direction of the Coon tavern. He was stiff and cold, and could hardly roll his portly self out of the saddle. But Bill fed and stabled the wheezing old roan; and the three of us made our way toward the house. I noticed as we went along that my companions had a great deal to say to each other in sibilant, confidential tones; and I was not slow in surmising what was the burden of their whispered colloquy.

Supper was over and Vance and I were alone in

the sitting-room. He was assisting me over some formidable problems in arithmetic that I was unable to surmount unaided. But I observed that his mind was not upon the work before us; that his brow was wrinkled in moody thought; that he was perplexed over something foreign to the lesson. My nimble wits jumped to a conclusion; and I remarked:

"Vance, you said that man Irving got your slaves, didn't you?"

He bent his head slightly; his half-closed eyes turned upon me. Then he asked:

"Why?"

"Maybe it's some of them he's hunting."

"It may be, Tom."

"Do you think it is?"

He nodded gravely, his mouth tight shut.

"I'll bet David Ryal knows where they are!" I announced oracularly, pursing my lips and winking an eye.

"Yes?"—with rising inflection of voice.

"Uh-huh!"

"Very likely. Well, read the next example."

We resumed the lesson. Presently David and Bill came into the room from the kitchen, the one bearing a bundle of quilts and comforters, the other lugging a basket of food and a pot of steaming coffee.

"We're goin' out to feed an' pr'tect the widders an' the orphans," Bill said drolly, in answer to Vance's keen look of suspicion and inquiry.

The latter offered no reply to the voluntary and patent falsehood—its intentional transparency called for none; and the former rattled on:

"But we're short a hand, we are. Need a feller to carry a bundle o' straw. Course we *can* do it, in a pinch, 'r the widders an' orphans can go without it; but we'd like to have another hand in the business. Either o' you fellers ready to volunteer?"

Vance's face flushed, but with what emotion I had no means of knowing. He dropped his eyes to the slate upon his knees and said nothing.

Kirk continued: "We did think we had a hand to help us—John; but he's gone to bed with a spell o' the—the jamborees. Well, as ther' don't 'pear to be no volunteers, I reckon we'll have to do the job ourselves. 'Tain't no use to talk 'bout trustin' things to Providence—not much. The lazy rip don't hoe the weeds out of 'er own garden half the time. Come on, Dave—le's be moseyin'."

Ryal, chuckling at his companion's whimsicalities, followed the crotchety fellow through the door.

"They've gone to feed 'em!" I whispered to Vance.

"Yes," he answered, stretching his long legs, jamming his hands into his trousers' pockets, and dropping his chin upon his breast.

"Wonder where they are?"

He shook his head, frowning.

"You don't want to know, do you?"

"No!"—emphatically.

He sat unblinkingly staring at his boots. I silently took the slate from his lap and completed the problem he had begun for me. Then I closed my book with a slap to rouse him, and began—with timorous hesitation:

"Vance, what—what would you—you do, if—if you——"

Anticipating my half-formed question, he interrupted fiercely—gritting his teeth as he spit out the words:

"I don't know, Tom—I don't know what I'd do! I don't *want* to know where they are—I musn't *learn* where they are! But I would like to know that they are warm and comfortable!"

In his agitation he arose and paced the length of the room—to and fro, to and fro.

Awed by the storm I had raised, I tiptoed across the floor and put away my slate. Then I returned to my chair and collapsed into its depths; but I was closely observant of Vance's every movement. Presently he stopped before the window—his legs far apart, his hands interlocked behind him—and stood gazing vacantly out at the snowy landscape, silver-white in the first rays of the rising moon. His auburn ringlets were damp and limp with the sweat that stood in beads upon his brow.

Of a sudden he turned from the window, caught up hat and cloak, and went out into the cold night.

I gazed after him yearningly, regretfully—but afraid to say a word. I flew to the window and watched him follow the path to the gate, and turn down the road. When he had disappeared from my sight, I returned to my place in front of the fire and surrendered myself to unavailing personal condemnation.

After a while Ruth and Tildy came in, and soon the screech of the crazy loom and the buzz of the

spinning-wheel were coaxing me to slumber. Anxious questioning was in Ruth's eyes, as she let them rove around the room and finally settle upon me. But drowsiness—the delicious drowsiness that follows long exposure to cold—had dulled my concern; and I dropped asleep, without a thought of relieving her disquietude.

I was awakened by the return of David and Bill. They entered noisily, their garments saturated with cold air; and, standing upon the hot hearth, they stamped the snow from their boots and removed comforters and outer coats. When they had warmed themselves they engaged in a game of checkers.

Bill remarked, as they commenced the game: "B'lieve it's moderatin'; be rainin' inside o' forty-eight hours."

I sat and watched them, my cheek in my palm, my elbows upon the arm of my chair—my thoughts in cloudland. Neither of them made inquiry in regard to the whereabouts of Vance. Ruth's wheel continued its drowsy hum; Tildy's loom kept up its monotonous scream. Kirk and Ryal spoke infrequently—their noses close to the checker-board upon their knees, their heads near together. I yawned, stretched, nodded—and fell asleep again.

When I came out of my second nap Vance had returned. The checker-players had finished their game, and the two women had quit their work and retired. As soon as I was fully awake I heard Bill saying:

"No, you needn't worry nothin' 'bout 'em, Vance;

they're all right—the widders an' orphans is,"—with a facetious wink at David and an expressive chuckle.—“Course you don't want to know where they are, an' I don't mean to let you know, neither. I never was guilty o' tollin' a feller-mortal into temptation, n'r o' gittin' behind him an' shovin' him in, an' I ain't a-goin' to be now. No, *sir!* You needn't worry 'bout our widders an' orphans—Dave's an' mine. We'll look after 'em, an' take good keer of 'em. They've got the'r bellies full, an' they've got a place to sleep. Not the best place 'maginable, p'r'aps; but they've *got* a place. Straw makes a better bed 'n no bed, an' ol' quilts an' comforters keeps out the cold jest as well as new ones. Anyhow, they beat a cellar door fer keepin' the shivers out of a feller's bones. An' I knowed a fam'ly once that was so poor that they didn't have nothin' to put over 'em o' nights but the cellar door—which was off the hinges.”

I began to prepare for bed, leisurely divesting myself of boots and stockings, and gaping and rubbing my eyes. No one replied to Bill's nonsensical chatter; and he droveled along, pulling at his pipe at odd intervals:

“No, ther' ain't no use o' y'r frettin' 'bout the widders and orphans, Vance. They're all righty—you bet! An' we'll take 'em away from this strip o' clearin' to-morrer night—remove all stumblin' blocks from the path o' the weak an' unwary brother, as it was. But to-night they're as snug as a dollar in a beggar's wallet. W'y, they've even got a fire!”

David lifted his drowsy lids and gave the speaker a startled look of warning; but Bill proceeded heedlessly:

"Not a very big fire, of course; an' the'r flue don't draw very well, an' to-morrer they'll smell like a passel o' smoked hams, likely, but they've got a fire."

I removed my pea-jacket and hitched nearer to the roaring blaze to toast my heels. Vance sat ruminating, glowering at the andirons, and occasionally glancing at the clock. David leaned back in his chair and rocked gently, his eyes closed. His hands were clasped over his protuberant abdomen, and his escaping breath blubbered his fat lips. Presently his jaw dropped and he began to snore.

After a short pause, during which he refilled and relighted his pipe, the irrepressible Bill resumed:

"Vance, the way you're actin' 'bout this thing, declarin' you'll do a certain thing if it comes in y'r way, an' frettin' y'rself into a fever fer fear it *will* come in y'r way, puts me in mind o' ol' Fin Marvel the time the high water come purty near washin' his cabin away. Guess I'll tell it to you; know it'll make you sleep better."

Vance offered no objection to the proposal. It is doubtful that he heard it.

Bill continued: "Ol' Fin lived over on Little Wolf creek in them days, fifteen 'r twenty years ago; an' his shanty stood on a piece o' low ground, back a hundred yards 'r so from the stream. He was a c'ntrary ol' cuss, an' rougher'n the bark on a shellbark hick'ry. Folks alluz wondered how Lizy,

—that was his wife, an' a mighty decent, good ol' soul she was—could live with him an' put up with his tantrums, as she done. He went barefooted half the winter an' wore boots all summer, jest to be odd an' git people to talkin' 'bout him; an' many's the time I've seen him tramp down briars with his bare heel, 'r pull up green thistles with his naked hand.

"Lizy b'longed to meetin', an' so did Fin—half the year. He used to git r'ligion ev'ry winter, an' sweat it out ev'ry summer. It was him that got up in an 'xperience meetin', one time over at Hog Holler, an' said: 'Brothers an' sisters, I could live a purty good Christian, if the dod-danged boys 'ld quit takin' my coon dog out huntin'!'

"But the way he carried sail the time the high water come so near bapsousin' him an' his household goods was the funniest thing—of all his doin's. The creek come up till it overflowed its banks an' got into the cornfield in front of his house. Fin went down an' took a look at it, an' come back a-snortin' an' a-grumblin', an' a-swearin' he hoped the water'd go on raisin' till it got from hilltop to hilltop.

"'Fin Marvel,' Lizy says, shakin' a floury finger at him—she was mixin' bread—'you'll be repentin' o' them words 'fore an hour.'

"'Never!' yells Fin. 'Never in this world!'

"An' he moseys off down to the creek ag'in—madder'n a bald-faced hornet in harvest time.

"Lizy went on tendin' to 'er ironin' an' bakin', an' a-hummin' a hymn to 'erself. After a while, though, she takes a peep out the winder. An' there

was Fin comin' up the path singin' 'On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand,' an' the water was follerin' him purty nigh as fast as he could walk.

"He comes into the house an' looks kind o' pitiful like at Lizy; but she don't never say a word. He walks over to the winder an' sees the water purty near up to the corner o' the cabin. Then he's skeered sure 'nough; an' he takes the dusty Bible down an' reads a chapter out loud. Finally, he goes an' takes another peek; an' the water's up on the doorstep. He commences singin'—'There's One More River to Cross', an' a-clappin' his hands an' shoutin'.

"Jest then the water come slappin' in on the floor. That was too much fer the ol' ripscallion. He drops on his prayer-bones an' groans:

"'Git down on y'r knees, Lizy—git down on y'r knees! *You* pray—fer *I* dassn't! Pray fer the good Lord to d'liver us out o' this fix, as he d'livered the children o' Israel out o' the waves o' the Red Sea.'

"Well, the—the water—went down, of course; an'—an'——"

Bill had been growing drowsy—and drowsier, but had clung desperately to the thread of his yarn. Now, however, it slipped from his nerveless grasp. He strove to catch it—but could not, tried to lift his heavy lids—but failed; and with a sigh of infinite comfort and content he sunk into the arms of the wooing god. Soon his snoring respirations entered into contest with David's. Leaving the two peacefully sleeping, Vance and I crept up stairs to bed.

CHAPTER X.

“TO-MORROW’S Christmas, Vance.”

He and I were on our way to school the morning following the events recorded in the preceding chapter. He was leading along the narrow path in the deep snow, I carefully following in his footprints. The extreme cold had moderated, and the air was soft and moist. Gobs of wet snow were dropping from trees and fences, dimpling and indenting the smooth surface of the brown earth’s spotless coverlet. Sounds came from near and far with startling distinctness.

“Yes, to-morrow will be Christmas, Tom,” he made answer to my remark. But his speech showed complete apathy on the subject.

“What would you like to have for a Christmas gift, Vance?” I asked, aiming to rouse him.

“What would I like for a Christmas gift?” he returned, forcing a laugh and striving to evince an interest he did not feel. “Let me see, Tom. I think I’d like the power and privilege of managing my own affairs and shaping my own destiny.”

“Why, don’t you have—have that?” I stammered awkwardly.

“Not altogether—not as I’d like,” he replied, increasing his speed and the length of his strides—which caused me to break into a trot to keep up with him.

"Ruth says we can be what we want to be," I panted.

"It's evident Ruth isn't a Presbyterian," he laughed; "she doesn't believe in foreordination."

"What's that?" I inquired.

"Foreordination?"

"Uh-huh."

"I don't know that I can make you understand; but I'll try. Those who believe in foreordination hold that God has foreknowledge of everything that comes to pass—that He foreordains or foreorders it. Do you get the idea?"

"Yes, I guess so," I replied after a moment's profound thought. "But did God know we were going to have slavery in this country—and did He order it so?"

"According to foreordination—yes."

"And did God know that my father was to be a drunkard; and did He order that?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe a thing of the kind!" I cried hotly. "It's—it's wicked to believe that way!"

"Nevertheless, Tom, many worthy people hold to that doctrine; and they have some reasonable grounds for their faith. If we say that God has no foreknowledge of what happens in the world He has made, we call Him an ignoramus; if we say He does not foreordain what comes to pass, we call Him a weakling; and if we say He does know and does order all things good and bad we make Him an erratic and cruel tyrant. It's a puzzling problem, Tom. It's shocking to believe that God counte-

nances evil; it's irrational to believe that He does not. But I'm leading you into deep water—the treacherous, slimy pool wherein many a poor theologian has lost his footing and gone down.”

He smiled over his shoulder at me as he ceased speaking; but he did not slacken his rapid pace. In deep thought over what he had said, I trotted at his heels. Suddenly he came to a halt, and I bumped into him.

We had left the strip of timber-land behind and entered the tobacco fields. Immediately ahead of us, at a distance of a hundred yards, and to the right of the broken path, was one of the old log tobacco-houses. Vance stood like a statue, his eyes riveted upon the high and narrow structure. My gaze followed his, and I discerned graceful plumes of blue smoke curling from the crevices in the clap-board roof. At once I knew what it meant, and my heart jumped into my throat.

“What will he do—what will Vance do?” I kept repeating over and over, under my breath.

Several moments we stood there, neither voicing his thoughts aloud. But at last I heard my companion mutter in an agonized tone of anger and reproach:

“Just as I feared—just as I expected! And I told Ryal and Kirk that I must not learn the hiding-place of the black runaways! The cursed fools—to put them right here in my path! Ah!”—and he caught his breath sharply. “And right here in the path of Jim Irving, should he come to the school-house to see me!”

He wheeled in his tracks and cast a hurried glance along the trail we had come. Then he again fixed his attention upon the tobacco-house and resumed his muttering, but in so low a voice that I could not catch what he was saying. Apparently he had forgotten my presence. I saw him grind his heel into the snow and heard him grit his teeth. He made a move to go forward, but stopped, irresolute, and brought one clenched hand down upon the palm of the other.

Of a sudden the door of the tobacco-house opened slightly and a moon-shaped ebony face—fringed with a halo of gray wool—appeared in the crack. I could see the whites of the old darkey's eyes. Slowly he rolled them around his limited field of vision and finally rested them upon us. With a jerk the black face disappeared, and the door noiselessly swung shut.

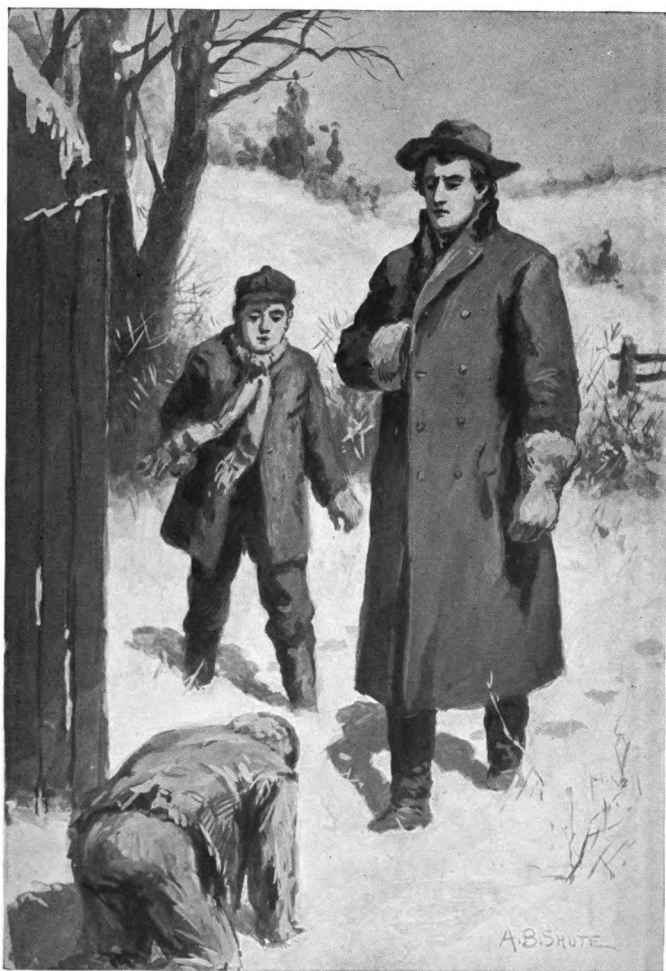
"Old Bob!" Vance ejaculated aloud.

Then he was off like an arrow toward the tobacco-house. I followed him as fast as I could persuade my short legs to carry me—stumbling, staggering as I went. I did not stop to inquire the motive of my mad hurry. Vance was going to do something, and I meant to see what.

He reached the building and almost jerked the flimsy door from its hinges as he flung it open. There was a succession of rustling sounds inside, followed by startled grunts and exclamations.

"Bob!" Vance called—and his voice was hard and cold. "Bob! Come out here!"

A wretched, decrepit figure, clad in patches and



“Vance stepped back and coolly looked down upon
the cowering slave.”

tatters, appeared in the doorway; then, with a forward lurch, fell prostrate at our feet.

Vance stepped back and coolly looked down upon the cowering slave. The poor black bowed his head to the ground and trembled and mumbled. The morning air stirred his scant gray wool and rustled his rags. At once I was moved to pity. Tears started in my eyes; and, hardly knowing what I feared, or what I was saying, I screeched passionately:

"You shan't hurt him! You *shan't*, you *shan't*!"

Vance gave me a vacant stare. I question that he comprehended a word of my wild declaration, he was so preoccupied.

"You mustn't—you shan't hurt him, Vance!" I screamed, dancing up and down.

"Hush, Tom!" he commanded crossly. "What ails you? I've no intention of hurting him."

The mention of my comrade's name—coupled with the sound of his voice, perhaps—produced a strange effect upon the crouching old negro. Cautiously he lifted his head; slowly—very slowly he rolled his eyes upward until they rested upon Vance's face. Then, with surprising agility, he scrambled to his feet, and, leaning forward and extending both hands toward his former master, he murmured tremulously:

"Marse Vance! Marse Vance!"

"Yes, Bob," Vance replied, with difficulty repressing a smile.

"Fo' de Lo'd!" exclaimed the old fellow, his

features spreading in a grin that revealed his toothless gums. "Deed an' I t'ought it was Marse Jim—come to take me back. I'se pow'rful glad to see you, Marse Vance!"

"I had not thought of meeting you here, Bob," Vance said sternly in return.

"An' I had no idee ob meetin' you heah, Marse Vance,"—bowing profoundly, his old wool hat tucked under his arm. "What you doin' heah, anyhow?"

"This is a free State; I am a white man, and have a right here. Now, Bob, what are *you* doing here?"

Vance bit his lip to hide his rising mirth.

"What's I doin' heah, Marse Vance? I's runnin' erway, dat's what!"

The stooped old slave said this with proper solemnity—and a manifestation of mortification and grief. The pleased grin faded from his face; the corners of his mouth sagged and twitched.

"Bob! Bob! I didn't think it of you!"

Deepest reproach was in the words and tone; and Vance's countenance showed that he felt what he expressed. As if he had received a blow, the aged darky pressed his hand to his heart and staggered against the log wall of the building. There he leaned heavily, his limbs trembling, his chest heaving, his eyes fastened in mute appeal on the young master he loved.

Vance's stern visage did not relax. Tears began to trickle down the negro's furrowed cheeks. At last—with sobs shaking his lean frame and almost choking his utterance—he said:

"Marse Vance, I's an ol' man—an' almos' ready to tumble into de grabe. I was in yo' fam'ly all my life, till you sol' me. I b'longed to yo' gran-fader, to yo' fader, an' to you. I lubbed you all; an' you all was good to ol' Bob. He neber got a blow from one ob you. He neber tried to run erway; he neber t'ought ob runnin' erway. You all was good to me, Marse Vance!"

The old man choked down and stopped. My throat was aching with the effort I made to control my emotion, and I turned aside to hide the moisture in my eyes. Vance's expression had softened to a degree. He nervously shifted his weight from one leg to the other—evidence that he was ill at ease. From the dark interior of the tobacco-house came the moving sound of half-smothered moans and wails.

Old Bob applied his ragged sleeve to his eyes and resumed: "You blames me fo' runnin' erway, Marse Vance. But I couldn't done stan' de 'buse an' de beatin's—I couldn't done stan' it! I'd neber been use to dat, Marse Vance; *you* knows dat! But you blames me; an' I'll go back. Marse Jim's a-huntin' me. You go an' tell him whar I is, Marse Vance. I doesn't want you to blame ol' Bob; dat's one t'ing I can't stan'! I hain't got long to lib, nohow; I'll stan' de kicks an' cuffs! 'Twon't be long—'twon't be long!"

He dropped his head and pressed his clasped hands to his breast—his eyes raining tears. The moans and wails within the building grew louder. I was blubbering softly—but narrowly observing

Vance. I saw him swallow spasmodically—a number of times; I saw him pass his hand over his twitching features. When he had partially regained control of his feelings he said brokenly:

“You say that they abused you, Bob—that they—they beat you?”

“Dey did, Marse Vance.”

“Who?”

The single word rang out quick and clear.

“De oberseer. He’s wid Marse Jim, huntin’ me now. An’ Marse Jim ’bused me hisse’f.”

“Have you any marks upon you?”

“Specks I has, Marse Vance.”

He stood a picture of utter despair, his woolly head still bowed and feebly wobbling from side to side.

“Let me see, Bob—jerk off your coat!”

A steely light flashed in Vance’s blue eyes as he gave the command.

Slowly, his fingers fumbling painfully, the old man removed the tattered garment. His thin cotton shirt was in strips and strings; and he shivered as the chill, damp air touched his bare skin. I stepped forward to view the evidence upon which he based his claim of abuse, and recoiled, shuddering. His bony back and shoulders were seamed and gashed horribly. Scars, partially healed lacerations, and bruises covered the entire surface from neck to hips. The sight made me sick.

“Oh, the damned brutes!”

It was Vance who spoke; and his voice was a hoarse roar of grief and rage. His face grew

turgid; the cords stood out upon his neck. With clenched hands and working features he strode up and down, stamping the earth. His wonted coolness was all gone; he was boiling with anger. His auburn hair seemed to stand on end, and froth flecked his lips. I was amazed—terrified, almost—at his exhibition of towering passion.

“Put on your coat and go back in there!” he thundered at the wondering negro.

Old Bob obeyed with alacrity, casting a puzzled glance over his shoulder. Vance slammed the door shut, and with the heel of his hand recklessly hammered the wooden pin into place. Then he called through the cracks:

“Bob, stamp out that fire!”

“Yes, Marse Vance,” came faintly from within.

“And don’t poke your nose out again till I come back!”

“Jes’ so, Marse Vance.”

“How many are in there with you?”

“Two, sah.”

“Who are they?”

“Dey’s strange niggahs, Marse Vance; came from down on de Mississipp. Don’t reckon you knows ’em.”

“Jim Irving’s?”

“Yes, sah.”

“Both men?”

“Dey is, Marse Vance.”

My comrade then turned his attention to me.

“Tom, go on to the schoolhouse and build a fire,” he ordered. “Tell the scholars I’ll be there in an

hour or two. Don't stop to ask questions!"—I was shaping my mouth to inquire where he was going and what he meant to do. "Be off now!"

Without a word I picked up the dinner-basket and whirled and hurried away upon my mission. But as I rounded the corner of the building I heard him muttering:

"Lash old Bob's bare back—the brutal devil! I'll settle with him! And the nigger shan't go back with him—*he shall not!*"

A hundred yards beyond the tobacco-house I turned and looked back. Far down the path was Vance—flying like the wind, toward home.

I reached the schoolhouse and started a fire. Then I swept the uneven floor and dusted desks and benches. By twos and threes the scholars began to arrive; and in due time Vance put in an appearance—his face flushed, his auburn locks damp with sweat.

The forenoon passed as usual—the same humdrum of study and recitation. However, I doubt if the teacher heard the answers to one-half the questions he propounded.

At the noon-hour we boys engaged in promiscuous, rough-and-tumble snowballing, while the girls stood around and watched us—their mittened hands tucked into their armpits or rolled up in their aprons—and screeched and giggled incessantly. We begged Vance to come out and join us, but he laughingly declined. However, he condescended to stand in the door and smile indulgently. His presence—and the presence of the fair sex—emboldened us to

many desperate and foolhardy deeds of valor; and we gave and took blows that were absolutely stunning.

Finally the teacher found it necessary to call a halt in the dangerous sport, and caution us to be more considerate of our safety. The close of the noon-hour still saw us battling valiantly. .

About the middle of the short afternoon three men came riding up to the schoolhouse. The red sun rapidly sinking toward the horizon threw their elongated shadows into the room as they moved past the western window.

One of them dismounted and rapped sharply upon the door. It was Jim Irving; and his companions were his overseer and the deputy-sheriff from Mal-conta.

Vance was hearing the grammar class—a meager few, indeed, for in that day it was considered sufficient to be able to make one's self understood, without going in for the niceties of expression—and his attention was fixed upon the book in his hand. As the horsemen filed past the row of windows he looked up. Instantly his face darkened, and he rose to his feet.

The class before him observed his agitation, and began to comment one to another. Soon the whole school was in a buzz of excitement—all eyes fixed upon the teacher, or upon the door toward which his gaze was directed, all ears cocked expectantly.

Then came the knock. Every pupil craned his neck and held his breath. The stillness following the breezy murmur of many whispering voices, the

shuffle of many pairs of feet, was absolute and appalling. It was a time for the dropping of the proverbial pin.

Vance tossed his book upon the desk in front of him and strode toward the door. Again the muscles of his neck were standing out, tense and hard; again that steely light of danger was in his blue eyes. I observed and trembled—yet rejoiced and silently chuckled, withal—for I knew that a storm was about to break that would prove a revelation to Mr. James Irving, in the way of a display of pyrotechnics. And, picturing to myself the surprise and consternation of that gentleman, I found it rather difficult to maintain a solemnity befitting the occasion.

Vance threw open the door. Irving stood upon the stone step without, the bridle-rein over his arm. He was a tall, angular man of forty-five or fifty years, with drooping iron-gray mustache and red jovial face; but the smile that perpetually lurked round the corners of his sensual mouth was half ironical, half cunning and cruel.

“Hello, pedagogue!” was his jocular greeting, given with a jerky laugh.

Vance, his muscular arms folded upon his brawny chest, stood glaring straight into the intruder’s eyes, and refused to make reply.

“I want to talk with you a minute, you know, Chatham,” Irving went on, careless of the cold affront he had received and heedless of the young man’s threatening look and attitude. “Shall I come in, or will you step out?”

"Neither!" leaped from Vance's set lips. "You shan't come in; and I won't come out!"

Evidently Irving had resolved in advance to hold his temper throughout the interview. For now he bit his nether lip, swallowed his rising ire, and said smilingly:

"That's all right, my boy. I suppose you are too busy right now to take time to talk. But school 'll soon be out, I reckon. I'll wait around; it isn't unpleasant out here."

"You're bound to have an interview with me, are you, Irving?" Vance replied in a chill, menacing tone.

"Not *bound* to, Chatham,"—with a deprecating smile and gesture. "I'd *like* to, though."

"Very well. I'll be at your service in a few minutes."

The younger man stepped back and closed the door in the older's face. Then he turned to us and said:

"Scholars, you are dismissed. Put on your things and pass out at once. You're not to linger upon the school grounds, but go directly home."

However, he bent over me and whispered in my ear, "You may remain, Tom."

With wondering and inquiring expressions of face and voice, the others passed through the doorway. Soon all were gone, and the sound of their querulous remarks and observations was dying out in the distance. Jim Irving still stood upon the foot-worn flag step; his companions still patiently sat their horses.

Vance moved to the door and said briskly: "Now, Irving, what is it?"

"Chatham, I desire to talk with you——"

"Well, out with it!"

"Why, Vance, what ails you?"—with lifted brows and seductive smile. "What I have to say to you is of a private nature. Surely you don't want me to speak of it before these men and that boy?"

"If it's of what you hint, I don't want you to speak of it at all."

"You don't?"

"I do not."

Irving turned white around the mouth. A baleful light flamed in his eyes, and his gray mustache bristled. But he controlled himself and said icily:

"You know what I have in mind?"

"I do."

"What I whispered to you yesterday evening?"

"Yes."

"And you scorn my proposition—my offer?"

"You came here to repeat it?"

"Yes."

"And you made the pursuit of your slaves a pretense to come into this part of the country—to hunt me up?"

"I had no idea where you had gone, Vance, but I'm mighty glad I've run across you. Now will you scorn my offer?"

"As I scorn you, Jim Irving!"

Irving's face went white again. He coughed and gulped, and put up his hand to hide his emotion. When he could speak he said hoarsely:

"I—I think I understand you. But make your meaning plain!"

"I will!" Vance cried, with lifted lip and flashing teeth. And, bending forward, he lightly struck the other across the mouth with the back of his hand.

Irving's countenance turned livid—then purple. The explosion that had been imminent came.

"You dare to insult me, Vance Chatham—to challenge me?" he bellowed.

"I dare to slap the face of any cowardly cur!" Vance answered in a tone of fierce intensity. "And I stand ready to give you satisfaction."

"Cowardly cur! Cowardly cur!" blustered Irving. "My God, I can't stand that!"

He dropped the rein, whipped a long pistol from his clothing, and threateningly brandished it aloft. Vance made no move to retreat from his exposed position in the doorway; nor did his cheek blanch. His voice was soft-cadenced—slightly drawling, even—as he made reply:

"You'll have to stand it, Irving—or fight me a fair fight. And I repeat the insult; you're a cowardly cur! Your present action proves the truth of my words—drawing a pistol on an unarmed man. But I have a revolver in my desk, and if you want satisfaction at fifty paces——"

"Here—here!" cried the deputy-sheriff, rolling from the saddle and rushing forward. "This thing's gone far enough. As an officer of the law I command you both to stop. You two hot-heads 're in Ohio—not in Kentucky!"

Then he stepped up to Irving, laid a hand on the excited man's shoulder, and said persuasively:

"What's the use of standing here quarreling? It won't help you to find your runaways. Put up your pistol and get on your horse. We're wasting valuable time. Come on!"

Silently and sullenly Irving obeyed the officer's suggestion. But when he had remounted his horse and had the rein in his hand, he cast a malignant glance at his antagonist and snarled:

"You called me a cowardly cur, my young gentleman. I'll not forget it!"

"And I fling it at you as a parting courtesy!" Vance retorted. "The man who will lacerate the back of a feeble and unoffending old nigger is a cowardly cur—a cowardly brute!"

Thus far the thick-set, liquor-bloated overseer had not said a word—nor moved a muscle, scarcely. All through the stirring scene just described he had phlegmatically sat his horse, sodden and half-asleep. Now, however, he flung up his head and uttered a meaning "humph!"

Irving and the deputy-sheriff exchanged significant glances. Then the former turned to Vance and said sneeringly:

"So *that's* the way the wind blows, Chatham—eh? I thought all the time you knew something of the whereabouts of old Bob. Oh, you're sly! But you're not quite sly enough! You had the niggers hid in one of the tobacco-houses on Gaston's place last night. We saw straw in the building—and the remains of a fire; and around the

door was a lot of tracks. I suppose you've got the black runaways hid down at the farmhouse to-day. We'll just ride back that way and see. You're a fine Kentucky gentleman—you are! A nigger-stealer! An abolitionist!"

The taunting fling went home. Pale with fury, Vance sprang out upon the step—his tall, athletic form drawn to its full height and quivering from head to foot.

"Jim Irving," he panted, "get away from here! Go—go at once!"—and there was that in his voice, rather than in his words, that caused the slave-hunter instinctively to throw his horse back upon its haunches. "I've borne from you all that I can bear. You killed my mother—beggared me; and, as a fitting climax of your hellish villainy, you abused and beat a helpless old slave—a man I—I loved! Before God, this morning I vowed to draw you into a duel and kill you! But you—you miserable coward—you're afraid to fight! You assassin at heart! Slink away to Kentucky—and count your ill-gotten gains! But you'll go without Bob—that I promise you! And this as a final warning: Cross my path just once more—give me half an excuse—and I'll shoot you as I'd shoot the yellow dog that nips my horse's heels!"

The sentences poured forth in a rapid stream—a bubbling, frothing cataract of wrath. The sneering expression quickly deserted Irving's face as he listened. Fear—mean and groveling—stole into his heart and peeked out of the windows of his soul. It was plain that the man was what Vance

had called him—a cool, calculating villain, but a brutal coward, a miserable poltroon. He sat like one stunned, until the deputy-sheriff laid a hand upon his rein and said impatiently:

“Come on—let’s go. I think you’ll find your blacks down at John Gaston’s.”

The three then silently rode away. Roused to instant concern and activity by the officer’s words, Vance shoved his revolver into his pocket, saying:

“We must hurry, Tom, and be at the house as soon as they are, if possible. I let my unruly tongue run away with me; I said too much.”

On turning the corner of the schoolhouse we saw the trio disappearing from sight far down the road, going at a brisk trot. We followed them rapidly—Vance covering the ground with long, swift strides, I running to keep up with him. As we went along I observed pantingly:

“Vance, I’ll bet the scholars thought you dismissed school to join in the hunt for the negroes.”

“No doubt,” he replied, nodding.

“And that story ’ll be all over the district before Monday.”

He made no answer.

“Do you care, Vance?”

“No.”

On we raced. My legs grew weary, and I could hardly keep pace with him; but he did not slacken his speed, did not cast a backward glance, even. I set my teeth and grimly resolved to keep up with him until I dropped in my tracks.

At the crest of the hill sloping down to our house

he stopped. Through the leafless trees we could look down into the valley. The farm buildings and a portion of the road were in full view; but no horsemen were visible.

"What's become of them, Vance?" I asked anxiously.

He shook his head, but continued to sweep the valley with his keen blue eyes. Then, on a sudden, he gave a start, and with his finger indicated a point far down the frozen stream, where the highway put in a final appearance as it bent round the foot of the hill, toward Colby's furnace. There were three small black figures outlined against the background of snow, moving slowly.

"That's them!" I cried exultantly.

"Yes,"—and he heaved a sigh of relief—or disappointment.

"They didn't stop at the house at all, did they?"

"I don't know, Tom. At any rate, they didn't tarry long. We'll soon find out. Come on!"

As we went loping down the bridle-path I remarked: "I'm mighty glad they're gone, Vance."

"Why?" he asked, turning his head.

"Because maybe you'd have shot that man, and had to go to jail."

He made no reply.

A few yards further and I inquired. "*Would* you have shot him, Vance?"

"Perhaps."

"But *would* you?" I insisted.

"It's idle to speculate as to what I would or would not have done, Tom," he answered feelingly:

"I wasn't there—and probably they didn't stop at the house. Jim Irving has gone. I hope he has passed out of my life—forever; I don't want to have to murder him. Down in Kentucky he would be compelled to fight me, to maintain his honor; here public opinion relieves him of the responsibility—and lets the dastard escape the punishment he deserves!"

I was impressed with what my companion said; and I kept still long enough to turn the matter over in my mind. But I could not arrive at a satisfactory conclusion in regard to the right and the wrong of the thing; so I summarily dismissed it, and asked:

"Where are the negroes, Vance?"

"In the smokehouse."

"My!" I exclaimed. "I'm glad the men didn't stop; they'd have found the black fellows, sure."

My comrade nodded gravely, and a few seconds later we were crossing the highway in front of the house.

Ruth, looking white and scared, and Tildy, fluttering with trepidation, appeared in the kitchen doorway as we entered the yard. Vance smiled at them, and hurried on into the sitting-room. I closely tagged him. Bill Kirk sat before the fire, my father's long rifle across his knees, patting his foot and whistling.

"Did those men stop here, Bill?" Vance inquired abruptly.

"Yep."

The eccentric quit his whistling just long enough to eject the brief monosyllable.

"As they went up?"

"Nope."

"As they came back, eh?"

"Yep,"—still whistling industriously.

"Did they offer to search the premises?"

"Yep."

"But they didn't find the niggers, did they?"—
uneasiness uppermost in his voice.

"Nope."

"What caused them to quit—to abandon the
search?"

Bill affectionately patted the gun in his lap—
and continued his tune.

"Here!" Vance cried, playfully shaking the per-
verse fellow and laughing—thus betraying the in-
finite relief he felt. "Wake up—tell us all about
it!"

"Ther' ain't very much to tell," Bill drawled pro-
vokingly; "but like ol' Jonas Brigham used to say
'bout the War o' Twelve—'what I don't know 'bout
it wouldn't make a primer.'"

He deliberately arose and set the rifle in the
chimney-corner. Then, standing with his back to
the fire and his hands outspread behind him, he went
on:

"I seen the cusses w'en they went up the hill,
jest after noon. I thought maybe they'd take it
into the'r noggin's to stop as they come back; so I
got the ol' rifle down, cleaned 'er, an' loaded 'er up.
Ruth an' Tildy didn't want me to do nuthin' o' the
kind; 'fraid I'd fool 'round an' shoot somebody by
accident, I reckon. But I didn't pay no' tention to

them. I b'lieve in preparin' fer war in time o' peace; an' I done it.

"Well, I kep' one eye skinned—guess I'd 'ave kep' a dozen skinned if I'd had 'em; an' 'bout half an hour ago I seen the scamps come a-ridin' down the hill—like the devil was after 'em. I knowed in a minute they meant to stop here an' try to poke the'r noses into other people's business; so I picked up ol' Nancy, there, an' went out onto the step to see if I could be of any use to 'em.

"They rides up to the gate, big as ol' Pompey an' Julius Cæsar an' a few more o' them ol' codgers rolled into one; an' that runt of a dep'ty-sheriff sings out:

" 'Hello, there!'

" 'Hello y'rself!' says I. 'An' don't be orderin' other folks 'round.'

" 'What 're you doin' with that gun?' says he.

" 'Lookin' fer varmits,' says I, mighty solemn-like; 'an' it 'pears like I smell 'em, too.'

" 'Guess you must mean *coons*, don't you?' says he, tryin' to laugh—an' makin' a fizzle of it.

" 'Nope,' I answers, 'I mean *skunks*. I'm powerful fond o' shootin' 'em, too.'

" 'Say!' he bellers.

" 'Say it y'rself,' I answers; 'y'r mouth's open.'

" 'We're lookin' fer niggers,' he hollers.

" 'You ort to carry a lookin'-glass with you,' I answers.

" 'An' we think you've got 'em hid 'bout the premises,' he goes on; 'an' we're coming in to see.'

“‘Who told you so?’ I asks.

“‘Told ourselves,’ he answers, climbin’ off his hoss.

“‘Guess you’ve lied, then!’ says I, bringin’ the ol’ gun up to my shoulder.

“Well,” Bill continued, after refreshing his recollection with a chew of his favorite plug, “Ruth an’ Tildy was in the settin’-room, here, an’ they begun to ketch the’r breaths an’ screech an’ carry on—beggin’ me not to shoot. An’ John he was out in the kitchen—part o’ the time a-cussin’ like a steamboat mate, an’ a-yellin’ to give it to ’em, an’ part o’ the time a-groanin’ like he was havin’ his last sickness an’ his time had come. He’s up in bed now—blue as an indigo-bag, an’ shakin’ like a chap with the ager. Well, I didn’t say nothin’ more to nobody—jest kep’ the ol’ gun to my shoulder an’ my finger on the trigger. That dep’ty whispers to the other fellers a little bit, an’ then he says:

“‘I s’pose you know I’m an officer?’

“‘Don’t know nothin’ ’bout it,’ I answers.

“‘Well, I *am!*’ he yells.

“‘That’s twice you’ve said it,’ I laughs; ‘now you can whistle it.’

“‘An’ I’m comin’ in to hunt fer them niggers,’ he growls.

“‘Guess not,’ I says, squintin’ ’long the gun-bar’l.

“He holds another conflag with his pardners—all of ’em shaking th’r heads an’ talkin’ at once, an’ peekin’ over the’r shoulders at the path up the hill. Then they ups an’ rides away. An’ that’s all ther’

was of it. But I know wher' they've gone, an' what they're up to."

"Where—what?" was Vance's sharp inquiry.

Bill turned and expectorated a copious mouthful of tobacco-juice into the ash-grayed embers. Then he replied pompously—complacent self-importance in attitude and manner: "The dep'ty's gone back to Malconta to git a search-warrant, an' the other two fellers is waitin' an' watchin' down the road some'rs. They didn't 'ave no warrant with 'em, 'r they'd 'ave come in here—'r made a harder try at it, anyhow. Now, I'll tell you what we've got to do; jest as soon's it's dark we've got to git the niggers away from here. Them cusses 'll be back here with a warrant; an' we won't dare resist 'em—the law'll git hold of us."

"Where's David?" Vance asked, apparently ignoring Bill's cogent reasoning.

"Gone up the river, to the next station on the Underground, to fix things. He ort to be back now, an' will be purty soon."

A half-hour later Ryal returned, and reported that all arrangements were made for the successful transfer of our charges to other eager hands. Also, he gave out the rather disquieting news that he had seen the horses of Jim Irving and his overseer tied at Colby's furnace.

"Crows of a feather flocks in the same corn-field," was Kirk's sage remark. "Them dang rascals is tryin' to git Marsh Colby to help 'em, I'll bet a button! An' he'll do it, too—jest to git even with Chatham. We've got to look mighty sharp, 'r we're

goin' to git ketched with our boots off an' no kindlin'-wood in the house. 'Twon't do to let that dep'ty git back here with a search-warrant; we don't want to be buttin' our heads 'g'inst a jail door—an' tryin' to break in."

We ate an early supper. Afterward we looked after the material wants of the fugitives in the smokehouse, filling their stomachs with hot food and furnishing them with thick and warm clothing. Old Bob's companions in flight from servitude were two stalwart young bucks—magnificent, muscular animals with gleaming white teeth and insatiate appetites. I smile now as I recall the number of buttered biscuits each ate.

When the blacks were fed and clothed—to our satisfaction and to their unbounded delight—we sat down to plan the safest and surest way of eluding the vigilance of Irving and his companions and accomplishing our purpose.

"I'll tell you what my idee is," Bill said finally; "an' I think it's the best one, 'cause both you fellers—an' even Tom—has hinted at the same thing. It's this: Me an' Dave 'll put the wagon-bed on the bobs, hitch up ol' Dan an' Charley, an' drive off toward the Coon tavern. If anybody's on the watch they'll foller us—thinkin' we've got the niggers an' 're a-takin' 'em back further into the hills to hide 'em. Then Vance can hitch up to the sled—usin' Dick an' Bess, load in the runaways, an' make a break fer the next station. That's my plan."

"It's a good one," David said, thoughtfully rubbing his chin.

"How far is it to the next station?" Vance asked.

"'Bout eight miles," Bill replied. "It's right straight up the river road; you can't miss the place—big, double-hewed log house. All you'll 'ave to do is to drive up there an' holler 'em out."

"And when they ask you who you are," Ryall supplemented, "answer—'David, the friend of Jonathan.'"

"I don't like the idea——" Vance began.

"The idee o' what?" Bill interrupted impatiently, jumping to his feet and strutting up and down the room like a bantam cock.

"I don't like to be the one to carry away the niggers," Vance explained, in evident embarrassment. "I wouldn't mind taking old Bob; but——"

"No use o' bein' squawmish now!" Kirk snapped. "You've got to do it—r let ol' Bob go back into slav'ry. An' you might as well drink the liquor as smell the cork, anyhow. It's like this you see: As soon as the fellers on watch sees me an' Dave they'll think we've got the niggers, sure; they know we're abolitionists. If you'd do that part o' the job, they might not foller you. An' that *would* play the deuce!"

"That's so," David remarked, with a positive nod.

"Very well," Vance said, setting his square jaw. "Have your way."

And thus it was arranged.

By this time it was quite dark. David and Bill made ready to set out, both convulsed with smothered laughter. As they drove away from the gate I heard Bill say to his companion:

"Vance Chatham's a great one! When he gits into a thing, he's bound to go through with it. Puts me in mind o' the Widder Vander's ol' sow. Had to pull 'er ears off to git 'er up to the trough; an' 'er tail off to git 'er away."

Almost immediately following their departure three mounted men trotted up the road in pursuit of them. One of the trio was Marsh Colby.

Soon Vance and I had Dick and Bess to the sled; and he was prepared to start—the three negroes in the bottom of the box, covered with straw and bed clothes.

"I'm going with you, Vance," I remarked tentatively.

Tildy and Ruth were watching us. The former muttered something under her breath at my remark; and Ruth asked quickly, concern in her voice:

"Do you think it's safe for him to go, Vance?"

"Certainly," was the reassuring reply. "Climb in, Tom."

And he moved over to give me room upon the seat.

Down the snow-piled road we swiftly glided, neither speaking. The stars twinkled in the black depths above; the snow tinkled beneath our horses' hoofs. Halfway to Colby's furnace we met a solitary horseman, who drew aside to give us the broken track. It was the deputy-sheriff. He eyed us suspiciously, but let us pass, with a cheery "good-evening." Then, when we were fifty yards beyond him, he suddenly whirled and came riding after us.

"Hello! Halt! Wait!" he bellowed.

Vance covertly applied the lash, and the horses

broke into a gallop. Seeing we were rapidly drawing away from him, our pursuer reined in his animal and gave up the chase. When we turned a bend in the road and lost sight of him he still sat watching us.

Without further incident we reached our destination and delivered our trembling charges into the hands of those waiting to receive them.

At parting Vance said feelingly to his old black servitor: "This is Christmas eve, Bob; and my gift to you is the inestimable boon of freedom. But you don't know what it cost me! You never will—you never *can* know!"

"Gord bless you, Marse Vance!" was the tearful answer of the old slave. "I knows what you *means*, I does! I'll neber see you no mo', Marse Vance; I's got to die in de col' an' snowy Norf! But I won't fo'get you—no, no!"

He was weeping bitterly as they led him away. My comrade and I set out upon our return journey. The night was moonlit, cold and still. I ensconced myself beneath the coverings in the bottom of the sled-box; Vance rode upon the seat. For the first two or three miles he sat in silent thought, letting the horses go at their own pace. At last, however, he roused himself, raised the whip, and brought it down upon the backs of the mettlesome horses. Again and again he applied the stinging lash; I do not think he realized what he was doing, for he was anything but cruel at heart. The goaded beasts sprang into their collars and tore away like mad; the sled careened and slewed frightfully as it turned sharp corners

in the narrow road. I sat up, held my breath, and clung desperately to the sides of the box. And above the muffled thunder of hoofs, the jangle of chains, and the complaining squeak of the tortured sled I heard my companion muttering:

“I’m an *abolitionist!* A damned black abolitionist!”

CHAPTER XI

WE swept past Colby's furnace at runaway speed and swung into the creek road. All the way up the valley Vance let the horses pound—necks stretched, ears laid back, and going at a dead gallop. Bits of snow from their flying heels buffeted and blinded us; the rushing air cut our faces like a knife.

The family was up, impatiently awaiting our return, and at the sound of our headlong approach the various members came out to meet us. As we drew up at the gate, the horses panting and steaming, Kirk cried:

"Hello, Chatham! All right? Heard you comin' half a mile away—comin' like the devil diggin'——"

Then, at the sight of the black scowl upon Vance's face, he broke off abruptly.

"Got these hosses as wet as if you'd had 'em in the river," my father grumbled, with a fitful flash of his wonted arrogance and fault-finding, shuffling from one animal to the other and patting their reeking sides. "Ther's no sense in such drivin'—not a bit! An' I won't have no more of it!"

"Sh! tut, tut!" David cautioned, plucking the speaker's sleeve.

Vance leaped from the sled and threw the lines to Bill, vouchsafing no reply to my father's intemperate outbreak. The latter continued to stroke the horses' wet hides and mumble peevishly to himself. Ruth

read Vance's countenance and knew at once that he was greatly wrought up over something; but she asked no questions. Instead, she locked her arm in his and gently drew him toward the house. Tildy followed them, smiling a pleased smile.

"Not a bit o' sense in drivin' hosses that hard—not a cussed bit!" my father went on complainingly.

"Tut, tut, John!" David said soothingly. "They're not hurt—just a little warm and sweaty; a rub-down 'll fix 'em all right. And I presume the young man had a good reason for driving so fast—eh, Tom?"

"I—I guess so," I faltered, not knowing what else to say.

"Come on—let's go in to the fire," David suggested to my father. They withdrew, leaving Bill and me to put away the team. When we had nearly finished the task my companion remarked casually:

"Got along all right, did you, Tom—you an' Vance?"

"Yes," I made answer, yawning sleepily.

"Meet anyone, goin' 'r comin'?"

"Met the deputy-sheriff, going."

"Had an idee you did. Say anything to you?"

"Holloed at us to stop, after we'd got past him."

"Did?"

"Uh-huh."

"But you didn't, of course?"

"No, we whipped up."

"Then what?"

"He rode after us for a little piece; but soon stopped."

"Good! Didn't shoot at you—n'r nothin'?"

"No."

"Meet anybody else?"

I answered in the negative.

"What made Chatham drive so fast?" was Bill's next question.

"I—I don't know, I guess," I stammered.

"Yes you do!"—sternly.

"I—I think he was mad at himself for what he'd done."

"Jest what I thought," Bill laughed asthmatically. "Well, he'll git over it—an' live; such complaints don't often prove fatal. Me an' Dave had some fun—*we* did."

"Tell me about it!" I cried eagerly.

That was just what the capricious fellow was itching to do. I realized my mistake—regretted my precipitancy in making the request almost immediately; but it was too late. He had got started and was saying:

"You know I told all you fellers that some o' them slave-hunters was on the watch, an' 'ld foller me an' Dave soon as we started. Well, sir, they did. 'Course you seen 'em pass the house, fore you an' Vance lit out with the niggers. Me an' Dave hadn't got halfway to the Coon tavern w'en we heard 'em comin' after us—rippin' an' snortin,' an' braggin' what they'd do w'en they ketched up with us. Marsh Colby was with 'em. I put the whip to ol' Charley an' Dan, an' away we went—lickety-brindle.

"W'en we got to the Coon tavern we heerd the'r

hosses puffin' up the hill, right behind us. We hitched an' went into Hen Deaver's store, laughin' how mad them cusses 'ld be w'en they found out what a wild-goose chase they'd had.

"Dave asked fer the mail; an' I bought some tobacker an' candy, an' a few trinkets fer——"

He stopped, muttered something under his breath, and chuckled phthisically: "Didn't mean to tell you 'bout the candy an' things, Tom; but I let it out 'fore I thought. I got the candy fer you a Christmas present. Howsomever, I reckon it won't make no differ'nce in the taste o' the truck.

"Well, as I was goin' to tell you, w'en me an' Dave come out o' the store there was them three fellers settin' the'r hosses 'round our team. Marsh kep' kind o' back in the shadders, lookin' as sneakin' as a sheep-killin' dog, an' didn't 'ave nothin' to say; but the long, lanky feller that owns the niggers speaks up as chipper as a woodpecker, an' says:

"'Good-evenin', gentlemen.'

"'Good-evenin',' Dave an' me answers.

"'Ridin' out fer y'r health?' the feller asks.

"'Skeersley,' I says. 'Playin' Kris-Krinkle's more like it.'

"'Oh!' he answers; an' didn't say no more fer some little time.

"Me an' Dave turned the team 'round an' hopped in.

"'Wait a little bit,' the feller says sort o' crusty-like.

"'Can't do it,' I says, pickin' up the whip. 'An

you mustn't be delayin' Kris-Krinkle an' his rein-deers. This is him.'

"An' I patted Dave on the back.

"'What 'ave you done with my niggers?' the feller inquires.

"'We're not our black brothers' keepers,' Dave says as solemn-like as you please. 'Drive on, Bill.'

"If you don't turn 'em over, I'll have you a'rested,' the feller—Irvin', I guess Chatham calls him—hollers.

"'No use to turn 'em over,' I laughs; 'they're as black on one side as they are on t'other.'

"'Can't turn over what we hain't got,' Dave says, with that Quaker drawl o' his. 'Drive on, Bill!'

"I put the bud to the hosses, an' off we went.

"'Hold on!' Irving bellers. 'If you hain't got 'em now, where are they?'

"Dave didn't make no answer, but commences to sing—makin' it up as he went along, I guess:

"'W'en a black man leaves Kaintucky,
Straight fer Canada he's bound;
An' he takes a merry journey
On the good ol' Underground!
Oh, the train's a-runnin' Northward,
An' it's never goin' back;
An' the only way to stop it—
Is by tearin' up the track!'

"There was a lot more, but I can't remember it; an' Dave sung it all the way down the hill. Them fellers follered us clean home, growlin' an' swearin' to beat all; an' me an' Dave nearly died a-laughin'—tryin' to hold in an' not let 'em know it.

"Well—to cut a long yarn in the middle, fer I see you're clumpin' 'round like a rooster with his toes froze—w'en we all got back here, we run into the dep'ty-sheriff with a search-warrant. Him an' Irvin' an' the overseer—Marsh moved off down the road a piece by hisself—went to work an' searched the house an' all the out-buildin's, but didn't find what they was lookin' fer, of course. Then they held a little conflag among the'rselves—endin' in a fuss; an' finally got on the'r hosses an' rode off. Jest as the dep'ty was climbin' into his saddle he whispered to me:

"'I know what's become o' the niggers, but I ain't a-goin' to say a word. I've had enough o' the dirty job, anyhow.'

"An'—an' that's all, I guess," Bill sighed, reluctantly concluding the subject. "Now, tell me 'bout your an' Vance's trip."

"Not to-night," I said, edging toward the door; "I'm too cold and sleepy. I'll tell you to-morrow, Bill. Now I'm going to the house, and hang up my stockings and go to bed."

"Hang up y'r socks?" he muttered. "Oh!"—with a short laugh—"I understand; to-night is Christmas eve. I purty near fergot."

Then he fastened the stable door and hobbled after me, humming:

"The purty flow'rs was made fer to bloom, love,
The purty stars was made fer to shine;
The purty gals was made fer the boys, love—
An' maybe you was made fer mine."

On reaching the house, we found the other mem-

bers of the family preparing to retire. I suspended my stockings upon two nails driven in the edge of the mantelshef—much to Tildy's merriment and my father's disgust—ascended the stairs, and hustled into bed. I desired to leave the coast clear, that there might be no chance of my stockings remaining empty. I was twelve years old—I had learned to discredit the existence of the children's patron saint: but I had an unbounded and abiding faith in his incarnate representative and agent, Ruth. Never had she failed me; she would not now! I wondered what I should get—I wondered, I wondered! But I had no notion of spying around to find out. No, indeed! That would rob me of the pleasure of the morning's surprise. But how long—how interminably long—was the night ahead of me!

The placid white moon peeped in at my window and seemed to smile at me as I lay watching it, thinking—thinking of the morrow and what it would bring, of the plucked turkey hanging in the smokehouse, of the big crockful of doughnuts in the kitchen, of my stockings and what they might contain in the morning. Then my thoughts reverted to the events of the pregnant day just past. My lids grew heavy and dropped lower and lower; but I continued to think—think. My last conscious thought was of Jim Irving, but little by little my mental vision of him dimmed, faded—and at last was gone. And as he passed out of my mind, so he passed out of our lives—never to return.

I did not hear Vance come up to bed; I was asleep.

Christmas morning dawned clear and beautiful. The snow still lay heavy in wood and field. The sun came up red and round and soon warmed the frosty air. Shortly after sunrise dozens of redbirds and snowbirds descended from the thickets upon the hillsides—where they had remained for a week, almost, sheltered from the storm and succeeding cold weather—and began a search for food about the stacks and sheds. Later, the domestic fowls issued from their secure retreats, and broke the Sabbath-like stillness with noisy cackle and clatter. Soon the porkers in the log pen, the cattle and sheep under the straw sheds, and the horses in the stable began to call insistently for their breakfasts. Then blue smoke began to roll from the great stone chimneys of the farmhouse—in swaying, gyrating columns that lost themselves in the limitless ether; and the ptyalizing odors of cooking food and boiling coffee mellowed and modified the sharp tang of the frosty air. It was a picture of homelike peace and plenitude—once seen, once known, never to be forgotten!

I was the first member of the family to stir from bed on that rare winter morning. Half-dressed, I pattered down the stairs—followed by a laugh that ended in a yawn. Vance was awake.

I stood upon the cold hearth in my bare feet and with voracious eyes looked upon my suspended stockings. How I gloated over the unsymmetrical and bumpy plethora that had attacked them during the night! The rusty fire-dogs stood half-buried in dead, gray ashes, the atmosphere of the room was

chilly and disagreeable, and the voice of the tall clock in the chimney-corner seemed cross and complaining; but I gave little heed to forbidding surroundings.

I snatched loose my stockings and, flopping down upon the naked hearth, began an exploration of their depths.

First, I fished out a fat brown doughnut and a glossy red apple, and I was measurably pleased. True, there were bushels of just such apples in the cellar and a heaping crockful of similar doughnuts in the kitchen. But the knowledge of that fact detracted little from the pleasure I felt. This was Christmas! And that particular bit of fried cake, and that individual piece of fruit, had been put into my stocking by——

“Tildy!” I mumbled, taking a nibble of the one and a bite of the other.

Then I carefully laid them aside and shoved my hand farther into the yielding depths of the woolen treasure-bag from which they had come—all the time, however, keeping an eye upon its fellow and wondering what it contained.

This time I brought to light an oblong pasteboard box with a sliding cover. Scrawled across its top was the one word—“B-I-L-L.”

I held it to my ear and shook it. The rattle it gave forth assured me of its contents.

“Candy!” I murmured, smacking my lips in anticipatory gusto. But one other article remained in the stocking I had been exploring, far down in the toe. I drew it forth, sighing deeply that I had

worked out the lode—that the mine was exhausted. But at sight of the package I leaped to my feet with the glad and exulting cry of——

“Firecrackers! And from David!”

I hugged the paper parcel to my breast and capered about the floor, laughing gleefully. I heard Vance moving about in the room above, and I knew that he was dressing. Also, the sound of Bill building the kitchen fire came to my ears. I was undecided what to do—whether to pull on my boots and sally forth to shoot firecrackers or to determine what the second stocking held for me. Just as I made up my mind, Vance descended the stairs and Bill and David came in from the kitchen, and a few minutes later Ruth and Tildy joined us from the ell.

All stood around me, nudging one another and grinning as I examined my presents one by one, and carefully placed them in a heap upon the window sill. In addition to those already enumerated, I received a pair of checkered mittens from Ruth—I kissed them as I made the discovery that they were from her—a pair of ribbed socks from Granny Watson, a three-bladed knife from Bill, and a red cotton handkerchief—with a picture of “Washington crossing the Delaware” upon it—from Tildy.

But there was not one thing from my father—not one thing from Vance!

I was greatly disappointed, grievously hurt. I had not expected my father to remember me with a present; but Vance! I was robbed of half my

pleasure—cheated out of half my happiness. I felt no resentment toward my big comrade, but I was so sorry that he had not seen fit to give me something—the merest trifle, even. I turned my back and stood by the window, blindly fingering over my presents to hide the tears that would come!

“Sure you’ve got ev’rything out o’ them socks, Tom?” Bill asked.

And I thought I detected a laugh in his tone; and I was *sure* I heard Tildy struggling with her chronic giggle.

I nodded; but I did not look around.

“Guess you’d better take another squint,” Bill suggested; “ther’ might be a new shotgun ’r some-thin’ like that in the bottom o’ one o’ them stockin’s.”

“Pshaw!” I answered pettishly.

“Yes, take another look, Tom,” Ruth said, her voice tremulous—indicative of laughter or tears, I could not tell which.

I merely shrugged my shoulders; but I was doing some deep thinking. Maybe I *had* overlooked some insignificant trinket. But what matter? Oh, it might be from Vance! I began to wriggle uneasily—and wish that they would urge me further to make a more thorough examination of the treasure-bags.

“Tom, why don’t you do as Ruth says?”

It was Vance’s voice.

“Well, I will,” I replied sullenly.

Then, with assumed reluctance and indifference, I picked up a stocking and thrust a hand and arm into it to the elbow. Nothing! I grabbed the other

stocking and repeated the operation. Wedged down in the heel I felt a folded piece of writing paper, and I brought it forth. With clumsy, trembling fingers I smoothed it out and read:

“If Master Tom Gaston will look under his bed, he will find a Christmas gift that I hope may please him.

“VANCE CHATHAM.”

Away went the bit of paper, and away went I up the stairs—two at a bound. Peals and roars of hearty laughter rolled after me!

The room above was in shadow. I reached the side of the bed, dropped upon hands and knees, and dived under the muslin curtain that hung to the floor. My hands came in contact with a cold and heavy metallic object; then, with a pursy bag of some description. I seized both, dragged them out, and ran to the window with them. The one was a brand-new shotgun; the other, an ammunition-pouch, containing powder-horn and shot-flask, and having a small pocket for percussion-caps and a larger one for wadding.

I stood by the window for several minutes, critically scrutinizing the articles—and making a mental estimate of their value. I was delighted with them beyond measure. A shotgun and ammunition-pouch—and all mine, my very own! Just what I had always wanted ever since I had been big enough to tramp the hills and set snares and traps—two or three years, at least. I found it hard to believe

that such good fortune had come to me. And how my heart went out to Vance!

"Find 'em, Tom?" Bill called from the foot of the stairs.

"Yes," I yelled in reply.

"Fetch 'em down, then; we want to see what you've got."

But still I stood weighing the gun in my hands and sighting along its taper barrel. Then light footsteps came pattering up the stairway and across the floor, and Ruth held me in her arms—shotgun, ammunition-pouch and all!

She laughed, she wept; she kissed me and affectionately patted my cheek. My heart was full of love and gratitude—love for her, for Vance, for everybody—full to bursting. And I broke down and cried!

"You must go down now and thank Vance," she whispered softly.

With her arm around my neck and my precious treasure hugged to my bosom, I descended to the sitting-room. Bill had built a fire, and the ruddy, dancing flames were throwing warm kisses at the crouching shadows in the farthest corners of the apartment. Vance stood upon the wide hearth, his hands under his coattails, a winning smile upon his strong face. Ruth gave him a smile in return, and gently pushed me toward him.

"Vance, I—I thank——"

I got that far—but no farther. My voice trembled, the tears threatened to come, and I had to stop. Vance bent down, placed his hands upon

my shoulders, and said laughingly—though I could see the moisture glinting in his eyes:

“Never mind, Tom—my comrade! You needn’t try to express your thanks. You can’t comprehend it, perhaps, but *I* am the one under obligations!”

After I had pulled on my boots and washed my face and hands, and combed my tousled hair, I sat down silently to inspect and enjoy my many gifts. In the meantime, a further distribution of presents was going on among the other members of the family. Ruth gave Vance a pair of checkered mittens—the work of her own deft fingers, as were the ones she had presented to me; and Vance gave her a small gold locket containing his picture. Tildy favored Bill with a red-and-black neck comforter, and he returned the compliment with a heavy gutta-percha ring containing a silver set consisting of two hearts neatly and completely joined. The inartistic and valueless gew-gaw was of his own conception and handiwork.

In presenting it to her, he said: “Hold out y’r teeny little hand, Tildy. Le’s see—which is the ‘begagement finger? Well, it don’t make no differ’nce, anyhow; ’cause the ring won’t fit any of y’r fingers but the middle one. Two hearts j’ined as one! That’s a purty sentiment, Tildy—an’ it’s mine fer you! On she goes—an’ my gizzard goes with it!”

She had extended her hand, giggling and red of face—but secretly pleased; but at his concluding words she dealt him a box upon the ear that brought tears to his eyes.

"You lunny!" she exclaimed angrily. "I've a notion to snatch the thing off an' throw it in the fire. Bill Kirk, you hain't got a mite o' sense! Such *talk*—an' *before* ev'rybody! You ort to be ashamed! Two hearts j'ined as one, indeed! Huh! An' y'r gizzard goes with it, does it? I'll let you know that nobody's asked you fer y'r ol' gizzard—that's what! You scrawny, silly thing!"

"Now, Tildy!" Bill whined lugubriously—a hand over his heart, a woe-begone expression upon his bearded face. "Now, Tildy! An' I love you so—better 'n I love buckwheat cakes an' maple m'lasses! Tildy, you ortn't to use me so! W'y, ev'ry time I put this comfort 'round my neck I'll think o' y'r lovin' arms bein' there; an' I'll——"

"Oh, you ninny—you fool!" she cried, struggling to her feet, her face purple.

Then she gave way to an explosive cackle and hurried out of the room, to our infinite amusement and enjoyment.

David and my father, even, were not forgotten on this day of peace on earth and good will toward men. The two women of the family remembered them—Ryal receiving a leather-bound testament, and my father a weasel-skin purse. David was profuse in his thanks; but John Gaston merely grunted ungraciously and hurried away to his jug in the granary.

I carried my treasures upstairs and carefully stored them away in the great bureau of bird's-eye maple that stood in one corner of my sleeping room—all but the box of candy and the package of fire-



“The sitting room door stood ajar, and I looked in.”

crackers. With those articles nestling snugly in the pockets of my pea-jacket I went out upon the flag step—carrying with me a glowing brand from the fireplace—and there proceeded to enjoy myself after the manner of American boys the country over.

I was the last to get down to the breakfast table; and the last to arise from it. Bill and David had gone to the barnyard to finish the morning chores; Tildy was straining away the milk in the cellar—humming a hymn as she did so; and my father was sitting with his toes in the ashes of the kitchen fire, puffing at his pipe. But where were Vance and Ruth? I tiptoed into the passage separating the two apartments. The sitting-room door stood ajar, and I peeped in. There were the two I sought, standing close together in the middle of the floor. His arm was around her waist; her head rested upon his shoulder. A fine gold chain encircled her neck, to which was attached the locket he had given her. She held the bauble in one hand and with the other toyed with the glittering guard—her eyes cast down.

“It was my mother’s chain,” I heard Vance say softly. “I give it to you that you may not lose the locket—and the picture it contains.”

“And will it hold fast the giver?” she asked artlessly, looking up with a bright and happy smile.

“He’s bound to you by a stronger bond than a mere cord of yellow gold, Ruth!”

His voice was intense in its earnestness. I made a move to retreat, and my boot squeaked. Ruth

started, and Vance threw up his head, his nostrils dilated—defiance to the world in his eyes.

“It’s only Tom,” he said, a smile overspreading his features.

Then he bent and kissed her.

And what a Christmas dinner that was—that mid-day meal of the dear, dead past! Thinking of it—sighing for those joys over and gone forever, the song wells up in my heart:

“Roll back the wheels of time—hesitate no longer!

Youthful days were better far than present days, I know.

Let the dim eyes brighten and the feeble limbs grow stronger,
Basking in the sunshine of the balmy long ago!”

In the center of the table lay the great turkey upon a big yellow earthenware platter—the brown drumsticks tied together and pointing ceilingward; and inside the plump fowl was the inexhaustible mine of sage-flavored stuffing. Flanking the noble bird were a large bowl of savory gravy and a tray of steaming corn-bread; and a pan of crisp and satiny doughnuts, a pie of golden pumpkin and one of spicy mincemeat, a plate of sweet potatoes, a plate of turnip-sauce, a pitcher of sparkling cider, and a mug of yellow cream did duty as outposts and pickets. And captain over all was the shiny coffee-pot, smoking and simmering with extreme self-importance. But our onslaught was irresistible, and a mere remnant of the brave array remained when we retired from the field.

When Bill had eaten all he could hold—though his one eye was still voraciously devouring the rich

repast in front of him—he leaned back in his chair, folded his horny hands across his stomach, heaved a sigh of mingled repletion and regret and groaned:

“Darn it! Ol’ Mother Nature made a sort o’ misfit o’ things w’en she made me. Give me an appetitie two ’r three times too big fer my stomach, ’r vicy-versy—an’ maybe both. Ther’s Dave, now; he’s still a-eatin’. His appetite an’ stomach’s o’ the same size; an’ both of ’em’s tremendous.”

David gave the audacious speaker a glowering look and mumbled—his mouth full of pie:

“Bill, you talk entirely too much—and nothing but nonsense.”

“That’s it—give it to him!” Tildy cried, clapping her fat, red hands.

“’Spect I do talk too much,” Bill replied reflectively. “It’s a failin’ common to all the Kirks I ever knowed. I had an uncle that liter’ly talked hisself to death; got started an’ they couldn’t head him off. Talked till he wore his tongue off clean back to the roots, an’ then commenced to shake a stick an’ make signs. Died with his forefingers crossed into an X—meanin’ he didn’t want ’em to spend more’n ten dollars on his funer’l.”

“Bill! Bill!” David exclaimed irritably. “You ought to be ashamed to tell such enormous lies!”

Bill went on complacently: “’Spect I would be, if I was *tellin’* lies—which I ain’t. That’s one thing that can’t be laid up ag’inst the Kirks; they never could lie—never was smart enough to learn how, I guess. But they was all good talkers. I got a

good 'eal o' my gift o' gab from my mother, though. She was a woman, you know."

He cast a sly leer at Tildy.

"Bill Kirk, you're an awful liar—an' a big dunce!" she snapped.

He returned quickly: "Good 'eal of a dunce, I guess, Tildy. Must be, 'r I wouldn't go on lovin' you—w'en you're all the time pesterin' me an' callin' me names. Oh, Tildy—Tildy! If you only knowed the length an' breadth, an' the height an' width, an' the depth an' diam'ter, an' the circumfer'nce an' diagonal o' my love fer you, you'd——"

She fired a piece of crust across the table at him, and he stopped to dodge it. Then he resumed—this time directing his attention to Ryal:

"Dave, don't you think a couple o' ol' baches like us ort to be thinkin' 'bout gittin' married?"

David drained his coffee-cup and replied tartly: "*You* oughtn't; you'd let a woman starve while you sat around and talked."

"I know how to do some things besides talkin'," Bill answered composedly, cocking his head and winking at Tildy. "I know how to 'preciate good cookin'. An' if I do talk a good 'eal, I know w'en to keep still. Fer instance, I never talk w'en I eat. I go on the the'ry that the still shoat gits the most buttermilk. An' I was jest settin' here a-thinkin' that I was purty nigh old enough to git married an' have a home o' my own. Ther's Vance an' Ruth, now; they'll be gittin' hitched one o' these days. And Tildy an' me might jest as well be snugglin' up——"

"Bill!" Ruth said in a sharp whisper.

He lifted his brows and gave her a look of innocent inquiry.

"Sh!" she cautioned.

He continued to stare blankly at her. She placed a finger upon her lips, then pointed to the stairway. He understood and nodded. The meaning of her pantomime was plain to all. My father—having eaten but a few mouthfuls—had shambled up to his bed in the loft, moaning and complaining; and he could hear every word that was said.

We sat looking at one another in silence for a little time—no one attempting to resuscitate the conversation by introducing a new subject. But Bill Kirk was wrestling with his risibility; and presently he burst out laughing.

"Ruth," he said, "them motions o' yours—actin' like a deaf-an'-dumb person—puts me in mind o' how ol' John E. Wright played the joke on his wife an' sister."

"Bill," David inquired solemnly, "is this story a very long one?"

"Nope—not very," Bill answered complacently; "not much longer 'n the moral law, an' the golden rule, an' the Ten Commandments rolled into one, anyhow."

"All right, then, go ahead and tell it. I know you can't rest till you do."

"Yes, git through with it," Tildy tittered; "me an' Ruth wants to clear off the table an' do the dishes."

Vance and Ruth sat smiling at each other; and I

squirmed in my chair, rubbing my hands and chuckling.

Bill pursued calmly:

"Ol' John E. was a great joker; he'd ruther play a joke 'n eat w'en he was hungry. An' it didn't make no differ'nce who he played it on, neither. W'y, he fixed up a joke fer his own tombstone, an' had it chiseled on it, too. I've seen it many a time—out in the ol' Calvary graveyard. It run like this:

" 'Here lays my body. But I am no Jew,
Though carved on my tombstone's J. E. W.!
Bein' fond of a joke, it's quite likely I might
'Ave sometimes been wrong, if I hadn't been Wright!'

"Well, to go ahead with my story, John E.'s sister was an ol' maid an' lived over East; an' her an' his wife had never met each other. Finally, Juletty—that was her name—wrote that she was comin' to make 'er brother an' his wife a visit. So John E. sets to thinkin' how he'll play a joke on the two women w'en they meet; an' he hits on this plan:

"The mornin' that he started down to the boat-landin' to bring his sister an' 'er bundle out in the one-hoss wagon he says to his wife:

" 'Now, Jane, I hain't never told you, but Juletty's deafer 'n a mummy—can't hear herself sneeze, even. You'll have to talk mighty loud to 'er till she gits used to y'r voice; but don't let on no other way that you know she's deaf. I don't want you to hurt 'er feelin's, you understand.'

“‘Poor thing!’ says Jane. ‘What a pity! I wouldn’t hurt ’er feelin’s fer nothin’!’

“Then ol’ John E. pulled out fer the boat-landin’. An’ w’en he’d got there, an’ had his sister an’ ’er budget loaded into the wagon, he says to her:

“‘Juletty, I hate to tell you—but I must—that my wife’s kind o’ hard-o’-hearin’. I’ve never writ you the fact, ’cause she’s sort o’ sensitive ’bout the thing—an’ didn’t want me to mention it to you. The fact is, she’s purty near teetotally deaf—can’t much more ’n hear a clap o’ thunder. An’ w’en you two meets, you’ll ’ave to talk awful loud to ’er ’r she won’t hear a word you say. You want to holler at ’er—at the tip-top o’ y’r voice. But don’t let on in no other way that you know she’s deaf; it ’ld hurt ’er feelin’s like blazes, you understand?’

“‘W’y, the poor dear!’ says Juletty. ‘What a burnin’ shame! But I’ll be awful keerful not to hurt ’er feelin’s; I wouldn’t do that fer the world!’

“Well, what that ol’ scamp planned out is jest what happened, of course. W’en he’d got out to Foxtown—where he lived in them days—he drove up to the front of his house an’ dumped his sister an’ ’er budget out. Then he whipped up an’ hurried ’round to the stable.

“Jane come out an’ met Juletty at the door; an’ they both kissed an’ cried a little, as women has the habit o’ doin’. Then they commenced to talk—yellin’ an’ screechin’ at the top o’ the’r voices, an’ each one nearly bustin’ a lung tryin’ to out-holler the other one. John E. was ’round at the stables, bendin’ over the manger an’ nearly dyin’ a-laughin’.

Jane an' Juletty kep' a-goin', gittin' redder in the face, an' standin' on tip-toe, an' whoopin' an' howlin' like a couple o' wild Injins. People throwed open the'r doors an' winders to find out what was the matter, thinkin' there was a fuss 'r a fire some'rs. The dog stuck his tail 'twixt his legs an' went 'round the corner o' the house, a-yelpin' like sixty; an' the chickens went flappin' an' cacklin' in all d'rections.

"Finally Juletty screams: 'You needn't talk so loud to *me*, Jane; *I* ain't deaf!'

"'An' you needn't talk so loud to *me*,' yells Jane; '*I* ain't hard-o'-hearin', *neither*!'

"But each one thought t'other was ashamed to own up to bein' afflicted in that way; an' both of 'em went ahead shoutin' louder 'n ever, if any differ'nce. At last, though—w'en both of 'em was pantin' an' gaspin' fer breath—Jane screeched with all 'er might:

"'Juletty, you needn't holler at me; *I* ain't a *bit* hard-o'-hearin'!'

"'N'r *me*, neither!' screams Juletty.

"'W'y John E. said you was!' says Jane, droppin' 'er voice purty nigh to a whisper.

"'An' he told me that you was!' answers Juletty, droppin' *her* voice.

"Then they looked at one another, stupid-like, fer a minute—an' both bu'st out a-laughin', an' ev'rybody in hearin' j'ined 'em. Next they flew into one another's arms an' hugged an' cried a little more—as women alluz do—an' scampered into the house, vowin' to git even with John E. But they never did; nobody could git even with that rascal.

Yet, poor ol' feller, he was mighty good-hearted, an' could play the 'cordion the best of anybody I ever heerd!"

David was peacefully dozing, his double chin sunk into his fringe of white beard, the buttons on his waistcoat rising and falling rhythmically. Ruth had to wake him as we left the table.

Two other events of that long ago Christmas day to me seem worthy of record—the rabbit hunt Vance and I took in the afternoon and Marsh Colby's call in the evening.

An hour after dinner my comrade and I were abroad on the hills, he armed with my father's rifle, and I proudly bearing my new shotgun. The sun was quite warm; the snow was rapidly melting and settling, and the rivulets that coursed field and wood were brawling noisily. Over ridges, through thickets and along rocky ravines Vance led the way, and I pluckily and uncomplainingly followed. We had no dog—my father would not allow one upon the place—still, we managed to stir out a number of rabbits; and at last, after several wild and ineffectual shots, I bagged a big fellow. It was the first bunny that had ever fallen a victim to my prowess as a marksman; and it is hardly necessary to say that I was wildly and extravagantly elated over my success.

Vance offered to carry the rabbit for me—along with the two or three that he had shot, but I insisted on lugging the furry prize myself. And, on reaching home, with what vainglory I held it up to the admiring gaze of Ruth and Tildy—and listened to

their exclamations of wonder and delight! I think that was the proudest and happiest moment of my boyhood days!

It was at sunset that Marsh Colby and a number of drunken and demonstrative companions—young ruffians from the coal-banks just below Colby's furnace—came galloping up the road, whooping and yelling boisterously. They stopped at our gate and Marsh holloed for my father.

Reluctantly the latter arose from his accustomed place in the chimney-corner and went forth to answer to the hail in person. A few minutes later, though doors and windows were closed, we could hear their voices in loud discussion—the younger's angry and threatening, the older's scared and pleading.

Presently my father returned to the house, white and trembling, and said to Ruth: "Marsh is out there an' wants to see you."

"I don't want to see *him*," she replied haughtily.

"Well, you'll have to go out, anyhow."

"But I *won't*!"

"Look here, miss!" he cried angrily, his face going from white to red. "I'm y'r guardian, an' I guess you'll do what I say! Put on y'r things an' go out there!"

Ruth looked appealingly at Vance; he arose, advanced to my father's side and said:

"What does Colby want?"

"Wants to see Ruth, of course," was the crusty answer.

"What for?"

"I don't know; an' it's none o' your business, anyhow!"

Vance's features froze, but he replied calmly: "Perhaps. But I mean to make it my business *where* he sees her. She's not going out among that gang of drunken scoundrels. If she desires to speak with him, let him come in. We can go to the kitchen, leaving the sitting-room to them."

"But he won't come in; he don't like you."

"Let him stay where he is, then; and so shall she."

"You're not her master, Chatham," my father blustered weakly.

"Nor are you, Mr. Gaston—to the extent of sending her out to talk to a drunken ruffian—in a crowd of drunken ruffians!" Vance answered sternly. "Go out and tell him what I say."

"I can't do that—I don't dare to! He's threatened to kill me; I'm afraid of him! I don't dare to tell him I can't git her to come out!"

"Huh!" Bill snorted contemptuously, turning his back upon the disgusting spectacle and spitting spitefully at the fire.

"I'll go and tell him," Vance said, starting toward the door.

"No—no!" Ruth cried, catching him by the arm. "You mustn't, Vance!"

"Why?" he asked, laughing lightly.

"Because you'll get into trouble with them—I know you will. And you might get hurt."

As she finished she blushed hotly.

"Nonsense!" he laughed. "I'm not afraid."

And he strove to disengage her clasped hands.

"She's right," David remarked from the depths of his comfortable chair. "We know you're not afraid, Vance; you don't have to prove your bravery. It'll be better for you to take no part in the affair; you'll only tear open old wounds. You understand what I mean, I guess. I'll go out and see if Marsh won't listen to reason. He bears me no ill-will."

Vance gave in, but with very poor grace; and he restlessly paced the floor the few minutes that David was gone.

As the latter re-entered the door—his round face red with excitement and anger—Ruth asked anxiously: "Are they gone?"

"No," he panted. "The cowardly blackguards!"

"What did they do—what did they say?" Vance inquired quickly and sharply.

"Marsh is crazy with liquor," David made answer, mopping the sweat from his forehead. "He cursed me—me, a man old enough to be his father; and made all kinds of threats against John and you. Then, he spoke disrespectfully of——"

David stopped abruptly.

"Of whom?" leaped from Vance's lips.

Realizing that he had said too much—that he could not conceal what he had partly revealed, Ryal set his lips and silently inclined his head toward Ruth.

Vance jerked open the door, sprang over the sill and ran toward the road. David, Bill and I hurried after him; but when we reached his side at the gate he was alone. The defiant, taunting whoops and

imprecations of Marsh Colby and his gang of rowdies came to our ears from far up the road.

"You're fated to have serious trouble with that fellow, Chatham," David remarked solemnly, as we returned indoors.

CHAPTER XII

ON the Monday morning following Christmas, Ruth packed a large basket of food consisting of apples, pies, bread and meat, doughnuts, and a jug of milk, and gave it to Vance and me to carry to Granny Watson, on our way to school.

When we had reached the old woman's lone abode Vance said to me: "You may take the basket in to her, Tom."

"I'd—I'd rather you would," I pouted, a shiver racing up and down my spinal column.

I had in mind my uncanny experience of a few weeks before with the aged crone.

"What's the matter with you?" Vance laughed. "Take it along. You're acquainted with her; I'm not."

I reluctantly obeyed—in fear and trembling.

In answer to my timid knock I heard the sound of shuffling footsteps and creaking boards within the rude hut. Then the door swung inward, and I stood face to face with the dread personage—to me, witch and ogress rolled into one. The impulse was strong upon me to drop the basket and take to my heels. But that would not do; Vance stood in the road watching me—and I must deliver Ruth's message.

"Here's some things Ruth sent you, Granny." I shouted the words rapidly, my eyes upon the ground. "She said she was sorry you was sick and

couldn't come down and eat Christmas dinner with us; and she hopes you'll be well in time to help with the butchering of the beef."

The wrinkled dame silently took the basket from my hands, weighed it in her own, and set it within doors. I turned to speed away, but with surprising agility for one of her years she swooped down upon me and fastened her talons upon my arm. With difficulty I repressed a scream of fright. She whirled me toward her and, looking down into my face, cackled:

"Not so fast, Tom! I want to tell you what to say to Ruth. Tell 'er I'm very much obliged fer what she's sent me—no matter what it is. Beggars mustn't be choosers, you know. An' tell 'er I've jest had a touch o' the rheumatiz in my back—not sick at all; an' that I'll be on hand fer the butcherin', w'enever she sends me word. Can you remember all that?"

I nodded positively—and tried to jerk loose from her, but she held me fast.

"Not yet, Tom!" she laughed shrilly. "You don't call on granny very often; you can stay a minute an' be neighborly. Did you git the socks I knit you?"

"Uh-huh!" I answered at the top of my voice, still tugging to release myself.

"Look up here!" she cried, giving me a shake.

Like one under a mesmeric spell I rolled my eyes upward. She was chuckling noiselessly—her mouth wide open; and immediately I was fascinated with her beady orbs, her sunken cheeks, and her quiver-

ing, toothless jaws. I was attracted and repelled; I was frightened and I was not. I knew she would not harm me; yet I shuddered and shrank from her. I pitied the poor old thing; I liked her, even, in a way. But at that moment I would have given my new shotgun to escape from her presence! In my youthful brain—although I was not cognizant of the struggle going on—skepticism as to the supernatural was contending with inherited and environment-fostered superstition; and it lost the battle—won—and lost again!

“Why don’t you thank me for them socks, Tom?” Granny mumbled, a wistful expression upon her seamed countenance.

“I—I do!” I yelled. “Now, let me go; Vance’s waiting for me.”

“Vance?”—her black eyes seeking the middle of the road.—“Oh, the schoolmaster!”

She had released me, and I began to sidle away from her. Suddenly, however, she took a few rapid steps toward me and bent and peered into my face. The insane light that had so terrorized me on the day of Bailey’s sale shone in her sunken eyes. Her skinny features, her claw-like hands, were working; her baleful gaze held me spellbound.

“Listen, Tom Gaston!” she croaked—and her voice was the voice of a hoarse crow. “Ther’s goin’ to be war—war! The signs is right—all of ’em. An’ ther’s to be more an’ more trouble in your fam’ly—more an’ more! I can see it a-comin’—comin’ fast! Y’r father’s goin’ to die! Trouble! Trouble! An’ Marsh Colby’s goin’ to try to kill——”

I could stand no more! I wheeled and sped away from her as from a pestilence—my teeth chattering, my flesh creeping.

Vance did not hear what she said—he was too far away; and I did not see fit to tell him of her wild predictions. He twitted me about my pale face as I came out to him.

She was still standing at her door, bobbing her head, swaying her body, and flinging her lean arms about—like a great angular bird of prey preening itself—when we passed beyond a copse and lost sight of her.

The three weeks following Christmas were productive of sharp changes in the status of our affairs. The report that Vance had dismissed school to aid Jim Irving in the search for his runaway slaves became current in the district, and wrought a partial revolution of sentiment toward the young schoolmaster. A few hot-headed parents withdrew their children from school—"cuttin' off th'r noses to spite the'r faces," Bill said; and others did a deal of surly grumbling. Marsh Colby and his adherents made the most of the false report to stir up feeling adverse to Vance throughout the community. The latter's acquaintances, many of them, became his enemies; and some of those who had been his warmest supporters looked askance when they met him, and refused to recognize him. The attitude of their elders encouraged the youngsters to renewed rebellion, and Vance had his battles of the schoolroom to fight over again.

Ryal and Kirk would have gone forth, sowing the

truth broadcast in the furrows of the busy traducers of character; but Vance forbade them.

"Me an' Dave can straighten them kinks out in two days' time," Bill remarked, when what was being said and done came to his attention. "We'll ride 'round an' tell folks jest what you *did* do."

"You'll do nothing of the kind—if you value my friendship!" Vance cried angrily. "Let the dolts believe what they like; it doesn't matter to me. I'd a thousand times rather have the reputation they are giving me than be called an abolitionist! What I did was for old Bob's sake, alone. I'm still a Kentucky gentleman; and I can fight my own battles. You'll keep your lips closed!"

So things were left to shape themselves, so far as Vance and his friends were concerned. None of us dared to disobey the injunction he had placed upon us. But the extent of the feeling against him was not understood by any of us. Marsh Colby was looking after his own interests; and he took care that the fires of prejudice and passion did not lack fuel. He was blazing his way to the heinous crime he had in mind.

The first of January saw "protracted meeting" in progress at Hopewell church, one mile north of the Coon tavern. Here worshiped a congregation of Methodists, after the manner of the sect and the day; and great revivals were held every winter, lasting from one to many weeks, according to the interest manifested—the "seekers after souls" discontinuing their efforts only when the "mourners' bench" remained empty for several days and nights

in succession. They were stalwart worshipers, those backwoods Methodists; and their services were as crude and virile as themselves. When emotionally aroused they deported themselves as howling Der-vishes, and almost raised the roof with their shout-ing and bellowing. The "hell-fire-and-brimstone" sermon was popular—and necessary, it may be; and groans of grief and terror frequently drowned the hand-clappings and shouts of praise and joy. On more than one occasion, when a lad, I left that old church with the cold sweat trickling down my palsied spine and my heart aquake with mortal dread. And a night of fear and trembling followed, when I lay shivering in my bed—my head under the covers—thinking over my youthful sins and follies, and pray-ing and resolving, and hoping and despairing, by turns. One of those old-time orthodox sermons was a deluge of damnation, a holocaust of hell, and a whirlwind of wrath, combined. Happily they are of the past.

The Hopewell "meeting-house" stood upon a bald knob in a grove of stunted white oaks, and the gullied hills rolled away from it in all directions. The brier-bordered highway ran past it; and sur-rounding it—and enclosing a little graveyard to the rear—was a rough board-fence. A sagging gate, with broken ribs and hobbled with ball and chain, guarded the entrance to the enclosure, and creaked and complained as it swung to and fro at the behest of the fitful wind; and just outside was the big "upping-block" of heavy planks—in sum-mer the coveted resting-place of every bronzed and

barefoot boy, and the scene of many a bit of love-making as youthful gallant assisted dainty damsel into the saddle.

The church itself was a gaunt and bleary-eyed wooden building, unpainted and time-stained. It was weather-boarded without and roughly ceiled within. The clapboards of the roof, curled by sun and wet, flapped loosely in every boreal gale, and the chimney of soft red bricks had crumbled to the level of the comb. The windows were tall and narrow, containing many eight-by-ten panes of wavy, greenish glass. Two doorways led to the gloomy interior—one for women, the other for men. The aspect of the big room was stiff, grim and uncompromising. Two rows of unpainted pews extended the length of the floor, and in the middle of the wide aisle between, was a large wood-stove—which was a monstrosity of its kind. In size and shape it bore a strong resemblance—real or fancied—to a flat and dumpy coffin, and for that reason was an awe-inspiring and uncanny object. Its long legs were crooked and tipsy; its door, bearing a *bas-relief* of a circuit-rider upon a bob-tailed nag, had but one hinge. The tall pipe, disappearing between two smoke-blackened joists above, was a mere rust-eaten shell, ready to topple to ruin on the slightest provocation.

Beyond the stove, against the rear wall of the building, stood the pulpit. It was as big as a corn-crib, and resembled no other thing on earth, in the heavens above, or in the waters beneath. It was the unit of its kind—unique and alone: a huge box, in which the

preacher was buried when he sat down and on which he was resurrected and lifted on high when he stood up. Like a pair of stilts, it was elevating, but not necessarily refining. Upon it lay a leather-bound Bible. And, as I think of it, what a deal of thumping and banging that old Bible used to stand! It must have been full of the grace of God, literally and figuratively, for it never resented the buffetings it received—never attempted to retaliate for the unmerited blows.

Just in front of the pulpit was the “mourners’-bench”; there was no euphonious “mercy-seat” in that day and place. How many kneeling forms I used to see in front of it; how many faces shining with religious zeal surrounding it! What wails and groans and sobs and cries went up from the penitents; what songs and shouts, and prayers and petitions arose from the congregation! Nightly, during a stirring revival, that old bench was anointed with fervent kisses and baptized in penitential tears!

Behind the gaunt, gray building lay the beggarly churchyard. It was a scant and hummocky God’s-acre—full of tall and tangled grass and weeds, moss-grown tombstones, and old-fashioned posies. In one corner bushy evergreens locked their arms over the humble mounds and made a dark and dank arboreal crypt; and, in another, wild-raspberry vines ran riot over the half-effaced graves.

Chiseled upon the slabs of shelly brown sandstone were some of the quaintest epitaphs that ever had origin in the crotchety brains of religious fanatics.

But the one that drew me to it most often—and never failed to send me away in a delicious tremor of superstitious fear—was that:

“Tread lightly, friend, as you pass by.
As you are now, so once was I;
As I am now, so you shall be.
Prepare for death and follow me!”

Just beneath, some soulless wag had written, in pencil:

“To follow you I’ll not consent
Until I know which way you went.”

But in winter, when the cold wind soughed dolefully through the branches of the cedars and the dead leaves rustled to my tread, I used to stand by that particular grave and conjure to mind a picture of the dead man lying beneath six feet of damp earth, a sardonic grin upon his fleshless features, his skeleton hand beckoning me; and in summer, when the heated air was soporific with the smell of flowers and musical with the song of birds, the same repulsive vision presented itself—and fascinated and held me. To me, that epitaph conveyed no hope of immortality. According to my boyish interpretation of the half-illegible words, the grave ended all—*was* all!

I am an old man now; the wrinkles of many sorrows line my brow. I have just finished reading Haeckles’s “Riddle of the Universe”; but I must say his carefully prepared scientific treatise has exerted a lesser influence to shake my faith in immor-

talities than did that silly epitaph in the old country graveyard, years ago!

At school Vance and I were regaled daily with highly colored accounts of the progress of the meetings at Hopewell church, and of evenings I took delight in detailing those accounts to the others of the family—especially Ruth and Tildy. My glowing descriptions aroused in them a desire to attend the meetings, and thus was I, indirectly and innocently, responsible for another bit of trouble that befell us.

“Vance,” Bill remarked one evening, when the revival had been in progress about a week, “the women-folks is up in arms to go to the big-meetin’ to-night. It’s good sleddin’, an’ I’ve got ev’rything ready; what do you say to goin’?”

“I’ve no objections,” Vance replied—evinced little interest, however.

“Can I go, too, Bill?” I asked quickly, my heart throbbing at thought of the sled ride.

“If Ruth don’t keer,” he answered. “The sled’ll hold all of us. Don’t s’pose John’ll want to go, though. He can stay at home with the cat an’ keep house. Dave’s anxious to go; I was jest talkin’ to him ’bout it.”

“What’s the preacher’s name?” Vance inquired casually.

“Sol Hathaway,” Bill returned with animation. “He weighs up’ard o’ three hundred pounds, an’ can hammer more r’ligion out of a Bible’n any feller you ever seen. He’s got the gab to say jest what he thinks; an’ the grit to back it up, w’en it is

said. He sails right in an' chops the tree down, no matter who gits switched by the limbs. An' you bet ther' ain't no cuttin'-up in meetin' w'en he's preachin'—not *much*! W'y, he wrestles with sinners like he wrestles with Satan. One night, out at ol' Mount Zion, I seen him throw a feller plumb through the winder—a young smarty that was makin' fun o' the mourners. An' another time, up at Pisgah, he was a-preachin' away, an' some tipsy chaps in the back o' the house got to laughin'. Sol stopped his sermon, shut the Bible with a slap, an' says:

“ ‘The good Book commands us to cast out devils, an' I'm goin' to take a hand in that game, right now. I'm purty tender-hearted, an' I don't like to deal——’

“He'd got jest that far when one o' the tipsy fools yells out: ‘Give me the keerds, then, Sol; I'll deal 'em!’

“Ol' Sol slowly takes off his coat, rolls up his sleeves, comes down out o' the pulpit, an' says: ‘On second thought, Christian friends, I think I *will* deal; an' I'll give that mess o' young sinners a handful o' clubs!’

“An' them smarties went out the door, head-over-heels, with a whole armload o' stove-wood playin' tag with the'r coattails.”

Bill's biographical sketch of the pugilistic minister was cut short by Ruth, who came in to announce that she and Tildy were almost ready to set out; and the voluble human oddity hurried forth to hitch up the horses.

Our conveyance consisted of the great Connestoga

wagon-bed upon bobs. It was filled with clean straw, comforters and quilts, and was drawn by Bess and Dick, a mettlesome pair. Bill had literally strung the animals with strands of bells. With a deal of giggling and snuggling, Ruth and Tildy seated themselves in the rear of the vehicle, and David, Vance, Bill and I found places in the front end.

Just as Bill was taking up the lines and clucking to the team, my father came out and announced his intention of accompanying us.

"Have a notion to go with you," he said, kicking his feet against the side of the bed, to rid them of snow, and laughing apologetically. "I want to git r'ligion, anyhow; guess nobody needs it more 'n I do."

Again he laughed—a dry, mirthless, disagreeable rattle. No one bid him welcome to the company; but he climbed in and tucked the coverings around him. We were disagreeably surprised at his decision; not a little displeased. His breath was redolent with liquor; he was in an advanced stage of intoxication. He had always been a scoffer—had not been inside a church since I could remember; and I wondered what had induced him to go with us. I was enlightened, however, by overhearing Bill whisper to David:

"'Fraid to stay at home by hisself. Poor devil 'll be in the tremens 'fore a week."

Then he laughed aloud: "Well, here we go! Got to hurry up, if we want to git seats; meetin' begins at early candle-lightin'."

We fairly flew along the smooth white road, the merry jingle of the bells mingling with our shouts

and laughter. The roseate glow of the sun lost behind the hills still lingered—tremulously fading, little by little. It was dusk when we reached the Coon tavern, and the stars were faintly visible as we drew up at Hopewell church.

The gaunt building was ablaze with the yellow light of many tallow candles. Both sides of the highway were lined with saddle-horses and conveyances for many rods. We hitched our team in an unoccupied fence-corner, threw comforters over the steaming animals, and proceeded to the church. A great crowd were surging around the doorways, and we found difficulty in gaining entrance. The house was rapidly filling; most of the pews were occupied and many persons were standing in the aisle and around the pulpit. Two young men gave up their places to Ruth and Tildy. I found a seat with Bill, on a short bench between the doors. Vance, David and my father moved farther forward—that is, toward the mourners'-bench; and I lost sight of them.

The wood-stove was roaring, and the pipe was dull red. The tallow dips were flickering and guttering around the walls. Soon the house was packed to the point of suffocation, but still the people kept pouring in. Some came from fifteen miles away. At last all the pews were filled, and the aisles and the spaces around the pulpit and the doors were jammed. Puddles of muddy snow-water, melted from the hob-nailed boots and shoes, stood upon the floor. The atmosphere of the room, saturated with the exhalations of many pairs of lungs, was almost

unbearable. Moisture trickled down the window-panes in serpentine rills. Heads were throbbing, faces were burning, and feet were freezing. Comfort was out of the question, and order was an impossibility.

Sol Hathaway, the gigantic minister, arose in the pulpit. His bald head, sunk between massive shoulders, almost touched the ceiling; his luxuriant white beard swept his waist. I craned my neck, peered between two men in front of me, and fastened my gaze upon the pulpit and its single occupant.

After requesting the congregation to keep as quiet as circumstances would permit, he fixed a pair of steel-rimmed glasses astride his bulbous nose and read a selection from the Bible lying open before him. His voice was deep and sonorous; his eyes were gray and keen; and his attitude and demeanor were indicative of crude force and eloquence.

"Let us pray," he said solemnly and pompously—when he had come to the end of the chapter—closing the big book with a bang.

Those who could knelt upon the damp floor; all others reverently bowed their heads. I peeked between my fingers and narrowly observed all that was going on. With his hands clasped in front of him and his eyes rolled heavenward, the preacher poured forth a wordy prayer—half of humble supplication, half of impious and offensive egotism. Lusty "Amens!" from the assembled believers followed each sentence, and sanguine and earnest "God-grant-its!" and "Do-Lords!" seconded each plank of the voluminous petition. Men pounded the backs

of the seats in front of them or thumped the floor with hickory whip-stocks, and women moaned and sniffled. In my immediate vicinity, whispered remarks and quickly-suppressed titters added to the general confusion of sounds.

Following the prayer came a hymn. The preacher lined it out; and all who could sing—and many who could not!—joined in the rendering of it. What the singers lacked in musical knowledge and ability they made up in laudable endeavor to out-yell one another. Each individual appeared to consider the exercise a special test of lung-power and endurance, and strove accordingly.

Then Sol Hathaway took a text and began his discourse—if such a conglomerate jumble of butchered English, false premises, malodorous egotism, blind fanaticism, bald misconstruction, and rash conclusions could be called a discourse. He warmed to the work as he went along—raising his voice higher and higher, flailing his body with his arms, thumping the unoffending Bible, flaggelating the empty air, and stamping the pulpit. He paced up and down the rostrum like a caged beast; he sweat, he roared, he raged. He spoke of God as a “loving father”; and then gave Him attributes that would shame the devil. He depicted Him as a bearded tyrant with a club in one hand and a ginger-cake in the other, enticing His children in reach that He might rap them over the knuckles. He held the squirming, shrieking impenitent over the middle caldron of hell—by a single hair of the poor wretch’s head—and threatened to drop him into the

bubbling abyss. Ignorant and superstitious himself, he held his ignorant and superstitious hearers hypnotized; passionate and prejudiced, he appealed to their passions and prejudices. The Methodist doctrine was the true doctrine; all others were necessarily false and damnable. A moral man was worse than an outbreking sinner—"worse 'n a hoss-thief," as he expressed it. His sole aim was to fire the emotions of his people to white heat; and he succeeded. Not once did he appeal to their reason or their sense of right. Mouths agape, and hearts throbbing in unison with his rolling utterances, they sat charmed, drinking in all that he said—accepting it as the very truth.

He closed his peroration with a flapping of arms and coattails that threatened to send him soaring through the roof. This danger he narrowly averted by lolling over the front of the pulpit, clinging spasmodically to it, and panting and groaning aloud. The agony over, he descended to the floor and gave an invitation to "seekers" to come to the mourners'-bench.

"Come right up for'ard here," he bellowed, "an' kneel down at the mourners'-bench! Don't put it off another day; to-morrow you may wake up in hell—with not a drop o' water to wet y'r parched an' lollin' tongues! Come right now—fer now's the accepted time! If you're 'shamed o' God to-night, He'll be 'shamed o' you in that last great day! Salvation's free—an' God's ready an' waitin'! Come while the gate o' mercy stands open!"

And they did go—from all over the house. Some

had gone before—several days and nights in succession—and had not yet obtained that for which they so earnestly and persistently sought. With others it was the initial effort. To the front of the pulpit they flocked, and literally threw themselves down at the mourners'-bench, groveling, moaning and praying. They were of all ages, from the toddling child of eight to the tottering child of eighty.

The bench was quickly filled. What hand-clappings and shouts of joy rose from the believers! This one's son had "turned from the error of his ways"; that one's daughter had "turned her back upon the world." Another's husband had "yielded to conviction"; still another's wife had "placed her all upon the altar." The rapturous light radiating from the countenances of the zealots was a reflection of their white-hot emotions.

"Brother Grimes, lead us in prayer," the preacher said.

He made no mistake in the selection of his petitioner. Such a prayer as that gray-headed old "brother in Israel" prayed I had never heard before; such a prayer I have never heard since. In his fervor and excitement he cried—his cracked voice rising ever higher and higher:

"O Lord, be with us in these services! Let ev'rything we do be done with an eye single to Y'r name's honor an' glory! Come down an' touch the hard hearts o' these poor sinners with the softenin' finger of Y'r love! Come down right now, Lord! Don't wait to come in at the doors 'r winders—but come right down through the roof!"

I am not exaggerating; the last sentence was a part of his appeal. I shuddered and crouched lower in my seat, apprehensively—expectantly even—stealing a glance at the ceiling. Bill snorted contemptuously, pursing his lips and wrinkling his brows. I looked toward Ruth and Tildy; they sat with heads lowly bowed.

A hymn followed the old man's picturesque prayer. While the congregation was singing it a number of those at the mourners'-bench confessed conversion and were assisted to their feet. Then bedlam broke loose. The members of the church crowded forward to shake the hands of the new converts. Shouts and sobs, laughter and lamentations commingled. A pandemonium of wild hysteria ensued. Women embraced and kissed; men pummeled one another with fist and whip-stock. One young woman fell prostrate and lay writhing in hysterical convulsions; three good old grannies joined hands and danced as nimbly as damsels of sweet sixteen. It was the "greatest manifestation of the Holy Spirit" that had ever been known at Hopewell church.

Just when the hubbub was loudest I became aware of a minor stir of excitement among a group of men near one of the windows. Someone was attempting to make himself heard. But I was so walled in that I could not see who it was, nor what was going on; and the confusion was so great that I could not hear what the speaker was saying. Presently, however, Bill sprang to his feet, his mouth agape, and sought to peer over the shoulders of those hindering our view.

"Well, I'll be danged!" he muttered as he dropped back into his seat. "Now, what the mischief *is* up?"

"What is it, Bill?" I asked excitedly.

He set his lips and shook his head.

"John Gaston—by God!" someone hissed at my elbow.

I looked up quickly. There stood Marsh Colby, his face black with evil passion.

Then Sol Hathaway's voice arose, saying:

"Git quiet, brothers an' sisters. This is surely a great night in Zion! Truly the wicked 're fersakin' the'r ways an' turnin' to the Lord! You all know neighbor John Gaston. He's been a great sinner—an' a scoffer an' unbeliever all his life. He's purty near burnt out life's candle; an' his light's a-sputterin' an' a-threatenin' to go out any minute. Now, w'en he's jest 'bout ready to enter the valley o' the shadder, he's reachin' out his hand fer the cup o' mercy—he's thirstin' fer the water o' everlastin' life. Ther's a lesson in it fer some o' the rest o' you sinners. John Gaston's goin' to make a c'nfession; an' then he wants us to pray fer him. Git quiet, brothers an' sisters."

I glanced at Bill; his face wore an inscrutable expression. A sickening feeling of dread swept over me. I managed to get a look at Ruth and Tildy. Both were sitting bolt upright, but I could not see their faces. A slight disturbance—sharp words and shuffling of feet near the doorway on my left attracted my attention. Marsh was elbowing his way toward the outer air, muttering curses as he went.

Soon quiet was restored. I climbed upon the back of my seat, the better to see what was going on. My father, at Hathaway's request, arose and began to talk. His tones—piping and quavering, and at times so husky with maudlin emotion that his words were hardly audible—bore little resemblance to the big, bold voice of the John Gaston of old. In a weak and vague way he driveled of his polluted soul and of its need of being cleansed of all sin. A hush of keenest expectancy was upon the congregation.

Ruth edged her way back to Kirk and me, her face pale as paper.

"He's going to say too much!" she whispered to Bill. "Go to him—and make him sit down!"

"Can't!" he answered, stubbornly shaking his head.

She gave him a reproachful look; then silently returned to her place, her white features twitching.

"I've been an awful, awful wicked man!" my father cried, his voice rising to a shrill shriek. "Worse 'n you know, my Christian friends; I've been a *hoss-thief*!"

The secret—if what many had suspected and a few had known could be called a secret—was out at last; and from the lips of him who had most reason to keep it a secret. It was the act of a drunken dotard—a paretic imbecile. Nearly all in the congregation understood his mental condition; and pity savoring of disgust was the predominant feeling toward him. There was a sharp catching of breaths all over the house.

Sick with fear and apprehension, I almost tumbled

from my perch. Bill sat with his cheek in his palm, viciously chewing an end of his coarse mustache. I looked over the sea of heads to the front and right, vainly seeking the familiar forms of Vance and David. Of a sudden, I saw the former rise and rapidly begin to work his way toward the irresponsible man. A sigh of relief and thankfulness expanded my chest and, for the moment, relieved the sense of dizzy suffocation that threatened to send me rolling to the floor.

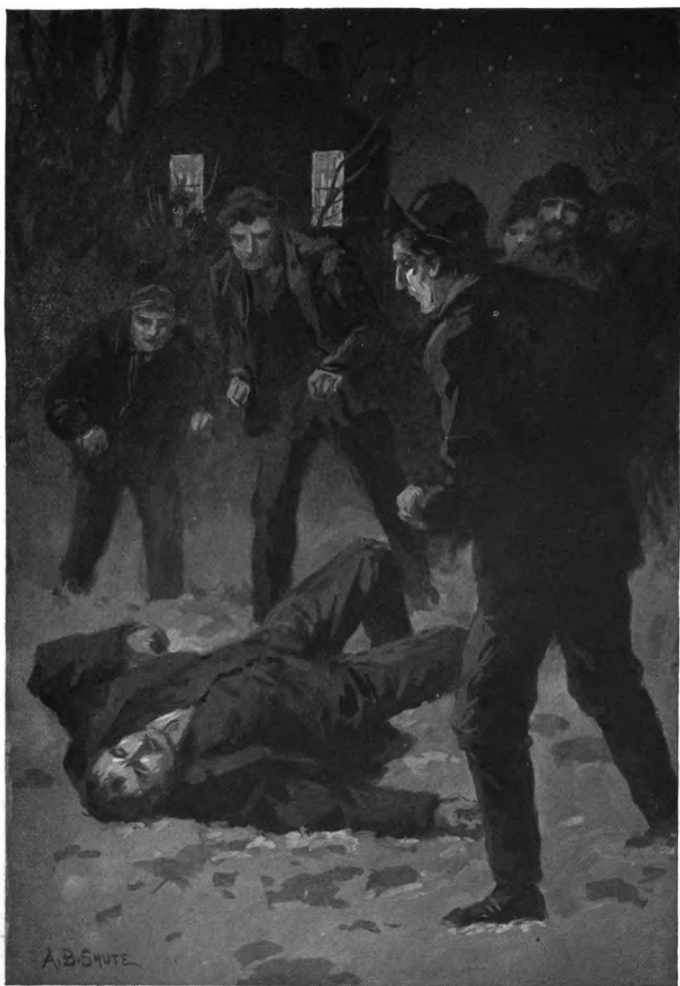
As Vance neared his side my father was saying:

"Yes, I—John Gaston—'ave been a hoss-thief! Let ev'rybody hear me say it! An' ther's others; an' I'm goin' to name 'em 'fore I git through! I'm goin' to make a clean breast o' the whole thing to-night! We stoled hosses right an' left; an' sent 'em South an' sold 'em. I hain't got long to live; an' I'm goin' to tell it all. We stoled ol' George Simpson's saddle-hoss, Kaintuck! An' he's back in this part o' the country ag'in; an' I'm goin' to tell——"

Vance seized him by the arm. The blabbing wretch started, ceased to speak and stood trembling. Then, slowly turning his wabbling head, he looked straight into Vance's eyes. An expression of wild alarm and questioning leaped into his own bleared orbs; and, like one awakened from a trance, he let loose an inarticulate, indescribable cry—the wail of a tortured soul, collapsed into his seat, and hid his face in his hands.

Without a word Vance calmly made his way back to his pew.

"Le's pray fer John Gaston, brothers an' sisters,"



“He struck my father a blow which felled him to the earth.”

Sol Hathaway said slowly, his deep voice vibrant with emotion. "Sister Darnell, you lead in prayer."

I have but a hazy recollection of the closing services of that night. I remember, however, that Bill and I were the first of our party to reach the open air—after the benediction had been pronounced and the congregation dismissed. Just outside the doors we waited for the others to appear. The cold air was grateful to my fevered face. My father groped his way out alone, and tottered on through the gate. Then came Ruth and Tildy, closely followed by David and Vance. Not a word was said as we set out for the place where our team was hitched.

I sped on ahead of the others. The moon was shining bright and the roadway was white as a silver ribbon. As I nearly approached our vehicle I heard a hoarse, angry voice and a strident, pleading one in loud discussion, in a shadowy fence-corner near at hand. A few steps farther, and I came in sight of Marsh Colby and my father surrounded by a group of the giant's cronies.

"You damned ol' dotard!" I heard Marsh shout. "I'll learn you how to bl'at y'r insides out! Take that!"

And he struck my father a blow that felled him to the earth, where he lay stunned and quivering. I thought he was killed, and in my terror I danced up and down and screamed. A form rushed past me; and another—and another—flying toward the spot where the wretched man lay. I saw Vance and Bill and David battling with Marsh and his comrades; I heard Ruth and Tildy shrilly calling for help. Vance

stood with his back to the fence, sending his assailants reeling right and left as they came within reach of his long arms—knocking them over like tenpins. Other men came running from the direction of the church and joined in the fracas—some taking one side and some taking the other. They did not wait to inquire the cause of the quarrel—the right or the wrong of the parties engaged in it; but each joined in where his individual sympathies lay. The crowd grew until the highway was full of shouting, swearing, clamoring, struggling men. But Vance and his few friends were greatly outnumbered; and I grew fearful of the outcome of the mad affair. So I ran to Ruth and hid my face in the folds of her skirt—begging her to do something to stop the fight.

Then a great hoarse voice arose, bellowing: “Stop that fightin’—stop it this minute! I won’t have it! D’you hear? Right in the shadder o’ the house o’ God! Shame on you! Stop it, I say! ’R I’ll call the wrath o’ the Almighty down on the last one o’ you!”

I took courage and lifted my face. Sol Hathaway’s massive shoulders were heaving this way and that through the tangled mass of howling, clawing humanity. His big voice continued to bellow—to shame and threaten. One by one the maddened men forgot their brute instincts, came to their sober senses, and staggered out of the snarled mass; and at last the fight was stopped. The two sides sullenly drew apart and stood defiantly muttering.

“Go along home—the last one o’ you!” the burly preacher roared. “An’ git down on y’r knees an’

pray God to fergive you! You needn't stand an' jaw back 'bout who's to blame; you're *all* to blame—ev'ry last dog of you! Now, shut up—an' go on home!"

He walked up and down between the two parties, rolling like a laboring vessel and motioning them apart. His wise counsel prevailed; his orders were obeyed. Gradually the two groups of wild-eyed belligerents disintegrated—melted and trickled away. Saddle-horses were untied and ridden off; teams were swung into the road and started homeward.

It had been a fistic encounter, purely, and no one was seriously injured—though many bore marks of the conflict in shape of scratches and contusions. Bad blood had been engendered, however, and the secret contention of the few had become the open quarrel of the many. Marsh Colby and his band of young scoundrels left the scene, vowing vengeance.

My father had revived and crawled into our vehicle. There we found him when we were ready to set out for home, moaning and whimpering childishly. Ruth tenderly covered him up and spoke soothingly to him. He mumbled some reply that I could not catch, and continued to whine and shiver.

Bill's one eye was almost closed from a blow, and David had to drive. The latter's cheek was swollen, and his coat was ripped up the back. Vance had not been touched about the head or face, but his clothes were torn and awry. The three were a sorry and, withal, a comical sight.

"Ruth," Vance laughed when we were well upon our homeward way, "you'll have to patch me up

before I'll be presentable. I feel as if I'd been courting close acquaintance with a den of wild beasts."

"I'm so sorry it had to happen," she replied chokingly.

"That's it," David put in; "it *had* to happen. I regret it; it was disgraceful. But there was no other way; those drunken devils would have kicked the life out of John. He's badly hurt, as it is. Too bad—too bad!"

"Mighty purty rumpus," Bill gurgled; "but I didn't see much o' the last of it. They was most too many fer us, though; two in front of a feller an' two behind him's pilin' it on ruther thick. B'lieve we'd 'ave got the best of 'em, though, if we'd been let alone. 'Tain't over, I'm feared; such things usually ain't over till someone gits killed. Tildy, ol' sweetheart, my eye's swelled shut, an' I can't see a stime. If I've lost my last peeper, you'll 'ave to lead me 'round by a string w'en we're married. Hal-luluyer! We had a bigger revival outside the meetin' house 'n they did inside."

He broke into a hearty laugh that was good to hear.

"I'd be ashamed, Bill Kirk!" Tildy snapped.

But her voice was tearful with emotion, and her concluding giggle was missing.

We drew up to our gate, and my father was helped from the sled.

"What did I do—what did I say?" he kept repeating parrot-like as they led him into the house.

CHAPTER XIII

VANCE and David assisted my father to bed. He fell into a deep sleep almost immediately; and an hour later, when Bill retired, he was resting quietly.

However, he failed to appear at the breakfast table next morning. Bill announced that his sick roommate was still sleeping, and advised that he be let alone. But Ruth was not satisfied, and ascended the rickety stairs to the loft. She found my father lying on his back, wide-eyed and delirious. He did not recognize her, and gave no heed to her voice. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes preternaturally bright, his respirations hurried. He whispered and nodded to himself, and fumbled and picked at the bedclothes. Occasionally a harsh, rasping cough contorted his features, shook his frame from head to foot, and caused him to clutch his side and moan.

Ruth was alarmed at his condition; it was only too evident that he was very ill. Immediately she had him removed to the spare room in the ell; and dispatched Bill, posthaste, to Malconta for a physician. Then she and Tildy set about doing all they could for the relief and comfort of the sufferer.

I went to school with a heavy heart. The sick man was little to me; still, his illness had a depressing effect upon my spirits. I think the real cause of my worriment was that I saw that Ruth was worried. One thing I know: I should have felt worse

had it been Bill or David who was ill—and infinitely worse had it been Vance.

On my return from school we found my father's condition more grave. Dr. Abbott had been to see him, had spoken of lung-fever, and had gone away—dubiously shaking his head and promising to return on the morrow. The patient's skin was hot and dry, his face congested. The arteries of the neck and temples throbbed perceptibly; the tongue was swollen and heavily coated. His passive stupor had changed to active delirium; he was wildly insane. At times it took the combined strength of several persons to keep him in bed. His stomach rejected everything—medicine, food, water; and we had no means of quieting him or putting him to sleep.

There was little rest or slumber for the household that night. The winter wind clawed and clamored without, the sick man groaned and yelled and babbled within. Ruth and Tildy were unremitting in their merciful ministrations; the men did all they could to assure and soothe the wretched sufferer. But there was so little one *could* do—so little the drink-crazed being would *have* done. He snatched away the poultices the doctor had ordered, as fast as they were put on his chest, and fought like a frenzied animal to throw off the coverings and escape from his nurses.

I retired to my bed and tried to sleep, but could not. The mad wind clutched at the loose clapboards of the roof and shrieked and howled dismally; footsteps and voices echoed throughout the house. So at last I arose, redressed myself and wandered from

room to room. Wherever I went I heard my father's wild tones, saw his fever-bright eyes and crazed looks. A delirious spell of unusual violence on his part would call me to the chamber where he lay; one hurried glance at his strangely contorted features and glaring eyes would send me out again. At one time he was sitting on the edge of the bed, bantering and bargaining in an imaginary horse-trade; at another time he was contending with a host of enemies that beset him—creations of his tortured and disordered brain. I could not stand the sight and fairly flew out of the room, a screech of eerie laughter hastening my footsteps. Ruth this time followed me to the sitting-room and kissed me and begged me to go to bed, but I refused.

So passed the night away. With what feelings of thankfulness we welcomed the dawn! My father had worn himself out and lay in a heavy stupor, breathing stertorously. As soon as it was gray daylight Bill mounted a horse and galloped off to Mal-conta to hasten the coming of the doctor.

I fell asleep in school that afternoon, and Vance considerably let me sleep, even when my classes were called out to recite.

For a week John Gaston lay unconscious, battling for his life—fighting a losing fight, as all could see. Dr. Abbott made daily visits to see his patient, but offered no hope. Granny Watson came down to help Tildy with the housework, Ruth devoting her entire attention to my father. Day and night she was at his bedside, barely taking time to eat a bite now and then and sleeping not at all. The report of John

Gaston's serious illness spread throughout the community, and, coupled with the tale of his strange behavior at Hopewell church, became the current topic of conversation at every fireside. Kind-hearted neighbors forgot their grievances and prejudices, and came to offer their services in the care of their old acquaintance. A few came through idle curiosity, no doubt, but the greater number, by far, were prompted by sweet and tender feelings—a desire to be helpful. Really, they were in the way and hindered more than they helped, but it would not have done to say so, of course. Everything was topsyturvy. Meals were irregular—at all hours—and the wonted order of the well-regulated household was a thing of the past. The place became a caravansary, in the economy of which I had no place. I ate whenever I would; and dropped down and slept when and where I could. Vance was the only one who found time to give me a thought. I was glad to get off to school of mornings with him; but I should have gone without washing my face and hands or combing my hair had he not looked after me. Poor Ruth! She did not mean to neglect me, and I know it grieved her that she had to do so; but the burden of all responsibility was upon her young shoulders, and she had no choice.

My father died on Friday evening, after an illness of eight days. He never regained consciousness—never recognized those around his bedside, never appreciated what was done for him. Ruth had kept me from school that day, in anticipation of the rapidly approaching end. But it was Vance who led me

into the dying man's presence at the last. Ruth was on her knees at the side of the bed, her head pillowed upon her folded arms. Sobs were shaking her slender form; and her dark hair was lying in a tangled mass upon the spotless counterpane. The room was full of people, sitting and standing around the bed and walls in various attitudes. Sympathy was written upon the faces of many; genuine sorrow upon the faces of some.

I clung tenaciously to Vance's finger as we threaded our way to the head of the bed, and with roving eyes and alert ears took in all that was going on. Then, on a sudden, I caught sight of my father's face and started back. His features were ghastly. His sunken eyes—encircled by dark rings—were rolled far back, until the sights were barely visible; his jaw was dropped, his lips were apart—revealing his yellow teeth. His breath came and went spasmodically—with an ever lengthening interval between gasps; and his chin rose and fell with the motions of his heaving chest.

The scene is one of the pictures that I can never forget, that I wish I never had seen—that I never *should* have seen. It was cruel thoughtlessness to take me there. It was the first time I ever had stood in the presence of death; and I was terrorized. I would have rushed headlong from the room, screaming, I believe, if I could have loosed myself from Vance's restraining grasp. As it was, I stood and cowered and trembled, my face averted from the awful spectacle before me.

Becoming aware of my presence, Ruth arose and

silently put her arm around me. Her countenance was tear-stained and sorrowful; and her breath was broken with dry sobs. I remember that I looked upon her and wondered why she was so grieved; indeed, marveled how she could be. As for myself, I did not shed a tear—did not heave a sigh; and longed only to escape from the depressing scene.

Then the end came, quietly, peacefully. John Gaston simply ceased to breathe; and all was over. Ruth bent and kissed his brow, damp with the dew of death, and wept afresh. Many in the room had their handkerchiefs out, and were wiping their eyes and sniffing. Tears were streaming down Tildy's fat cheeks; David's double chin was quivering with suppressed emotion. A lump rose in my throat. I was moved by the grief of the others—that was all. I swallowed; and again was casting about for an excuse to escape from the room.

"Don't you want to kiss him, Tom?" Ruth whispered in my ear.

I decidedly shook my head and turned away, shuddering at the thought. Call me a degenerate, a youthful stoic—what you will. I have thought over that scene a thousand times, with keenest regret; and you cannot denounce my total lack of all tender feeling for my father, as I have denounced it. Nevertheless, this truth remains: The blame attached to the dead parent, not to the living son. I was as he had made me. His death meant infinitely less to me than the death of any other member of the household would have meant. Oh, that I should have to say it—to admit it to myself, even!

The irony of fate! An hour later—just at sunset—George Simpson, the rightful owner of Kaintuck, accompanied by a constable armed with a warrant for the arrest of my father, rode up to our gate and dismounted. He was a portly man of seventy years, hale and well preserved. A fall from a horse early in life had shortened one leg, and he walked with a quite perceptible limp. He was swarthy-faced and loud-voiced, and had a habit, especially when awaiting an answer to a question, of throwing back his head and pulling fiercely at his white, wiry goatee with thumb and finger.

Most of the neighbors had departed, and Bill had gone to Malconta for the undertaker. I, alone, was in the yard when the two strangers put in an appearance, and I moved out to the road to meet them. The constable stood holding the two horses; the older man was already inside the gate.

“Does John Gaston live here?” he inquired briskly.

“No, sir,” I answered truthfully—and coolly. “He’s dead.”

“The devil you say!” ejaculated Mr. Simpson. “W’y, when did he die, bub?”

“Just a little while ago—about an hour ago.”

“Huh!” the constable grunted in a tone of surprise—bordering on incredulity.

The older man, with his shoulders sagged forward and his right elbow in the palm of his left hand, stood thoughtfully fingering his wisp of beard and keenly scrutinizing my face for several seconds. Then he turned to his companion, muttering gruffly:

"The boy's tellin' the truth. We've no business here. These people's got enough to bear right now. Le's be off 'fore anybody else finds out that we're here."

Then to me: "Bub, we was wantin' to see Mr. Gaston on a matter o' business. But it ain't partic'lar—don't make no differ'nce. Sorry we come w'en we did. An' don't say nothin' 'bout our stoppin'! Eh?"

"I won't," I promised.

They turned to remount their horses. But inexorable fate was not satisfied that the affair should end thus, for at that moment the front door of the sitting-room opened and Vance, David and two neighbors came toward us.

"How d'you do, George?" Ryal said, going up to Simpson, who stood with an arm thrown over the withers of his horse, an uneasy expression upon his fleshy visage.

The old abolitionist knew everybody, apparently.

"Purty well, Dave," was Simpson's reply to Ryal's greeting. "How 're you?"

"I'm all right. I suppose you know John Gaston's dead, eh?"

"Jest heard it; the boy there jest told me."

"And I suppose you came here to have him arrested, George?"

"Well, yes," Simpson reluctantly admitted. "Yes, Dave, I did. I heard what he'd said at Hope-well church a week'r so ago; an' I couldn't do nothin' else. But I didn't know he was sick even, 'r I

wouldn't 'ave come here—never. You know that, Dave Ryal—knowin' *me*."

This last he said meekly and apologetically.

"I understand," David replied, nodding solemnly.

There was a brief interval of silence. Then Vance stepped forward and said:

"Mr. Simpson, there is one thing you can do; your journey need not be in vain. You can take your horse away with you. He's in the stable."

"You mean Kaintuck?"

"Yes—Kaintuck."

"Who're *you*, young man?"

"My name's Vance Chatham. I brought the horse from Kentucky with me."

"You did, eh? How'd you come to have him?"

"My father bought him and gave him to me."

"I see. Who'd y'r daddy buy the critter of?"

"Shep Dickson."

"Oh, uh-huh!"—thoughtfully and savagely pulling his goatee.

"He's telling you the truth, George," David volunteered.

"I don't doubt it—not a word of it," Simpson answered quickly.

Then, after a moment's reflection: "W-e-ell, it won't do no harm to go out an' take a look at the hoss, anyhow—an' see if he still knows me. Hain't had a squint at him fer many moons."

Vance led the way to the stables and brought Kaintuck out into the open air. The noble horse stood rubbing his nose against his young master's arm and softly whinnying. Simpson limped around

the animal, pulled the flowing tail this way and that, lifted the velvety upper lip and critically examined the even teeth, and stooped and passed his hand up and down the flat, cordy legs. Then he straightened up, with an expiratory grunt, and remarked:

"It's Kaintuck, all right 'nough. I hain't forgot him; but I guess he's clean forgot me. No, he hain't by cracky! He's smellin' 'round my pockets. I used to give him sugar. Nice ol' boy!"—affectionately patting the glossy neck. "I give three hundred dollars fer him as a two-year-old; brung him from Kentucky myself. Was down there on a tradin' trip."

Then, turning quickly to Vance: "Young man, how much did y'r daddy pay fer the hoss?"

"About six hundred dollars, I think," Vance returned quietly.

"An' if I take him you're out six hundred dollars re'ly. It was a good round sum to pay fer one lump o' hoss flesh; but I guess he's worth it—I *guess* he is. I'd hate to see you lose that much money, young man."

"The horse belongs to you, Mr. Simpson."

"Y-e-s, that's so, prob'ly—in law. An' if I don't take him I'm out three hundred dollars."

Vance, evidently, did not deem it worth while to make reply. Simpson stood smoothing Kaintuck's satiny coat for a full half-minute. At last he lifted his chin and said:

"I'll tell you what's le's do, young man. Neither one of us is to blame 'bout this thing, so le's make a bargain—strike a differ'nce. What d'you say?"

"Kaintuck is yours," Vance responded stubbornly.

"Maybe he is—an' maybe he ain't," the other laughed. "I don't know what a court might say 'bout the matter—after this length o' time, 'specially. It's jest as a feller looks at the thing. I bought an' paid fer the hoss; so did you—'r y'r daddy, which is the same thing. One of us owns the hoss; but *which* one? *Both* of us don't. Now, I've got a proposition to make to you."

"I'm ready to hear it, of course," Vance smiled in return.

"Well," the older man went on, "you can't stand it to lose six hundred dollars very well, an' I don't want you to. I ain't able to lose three hundred dollars—'nless I have to; an' you wouldn't have me do it. So let's do the thing this way: You give me a hundred dollars an' keep the hoss. I offered a hundred fer his return, so if you give me a hundred you're really payin' me two hundred. You see how it is. That'll leave me out a hundred, an' you the same. What d'you say?"

Vance dropped his eyes to the ground and stood silently pondering. Simpson nudged David and winked and smiled. Finally Vance looked up and said frankly and feelingly: "Your offer is eminently fair, Mr. Simpson, but I cannot accept it."

"Why?" the old man jerked out.

"Because I haven't the money to spare."

"Oh!"

Then both were silent for some moments. Simpson was the first to renew the conversation.

"How'll this do, then, young man? The hoss is worth ev'ry cent of six hundred dollars. I'll give you four hundred an' fifty dollars an' take him. That makes him stand me at seven hundred an' fifty dollars; an' I'm out a hundred an' fifty—an' so 're you. What do you say to *that* offer?"

"I can't—I won't think of accepting it."

"You won't?"—with lifted brows.—"Why won't you?"

"I don't think the offer a fair one."

."What's the matter with it?"

"It wrongs you."

"That's my lookout."

"I won't consider it."

"I guess you'd like to keep Kaintuck, wouldn't you?"—slyly winking at David.

Vance was nettled and replied sharply: "If I felt that he were rightfully mine, Mr. Simpson, I *would* keep him—without consulting you or anybody else."

For one moment the old man appeared on the point of giving way to an exhibition of anger; but he quickly controlled himself and said with a wholesome laugh:

"Bully fer you, young man! That's the way I like to hear a feller talk. Now, listen to me a minute. I don't want to take a cent off o' you; an' I know you don't want to take a cent off o' me. I don't want the hoss, don't need him, an' won't have him. You do want him; an' you've got to keep him. That settles that part o' the matter. Now, as you said you couldn't accept my first offer 'cause

you hadn't the money to spare, let me ask you a question: What're you doin' in these parts?"

"Teaching school," Vance answered curtly and frigidly.

"Well, you could spare part o' the money w'en y'r school's out, couldn't you?"

"Probably."

"An' you'll have the balance of it some day, won't you?"

"I hope so—yes."

"Jest let it rest that way, then. You keep the hoss; I don't need him. An' I'm gittin' back a hundred dollars I never expected to git. You can pay me w'en you can pay me—no hurry 'bout it. I never was half as anxious to git the hoss back as I was to git hold o' the cusses that stoled him. Don't s'pose I'll ever have a chance to git after 'em now, though."

Then, turning to the constable, he said briskly.

"Jack's le's be movin' along; it's dusk now—an' we've got twenty miles to cover."

"Mr. Simpson, I thank you very much for your kindness," Vance murmured thickly.

"Never mind 'bout that," the old horse-dealer answered crustily as he climbed into the saddle, puffing and grunting. "Good-night, gentlemen. A little while ago I was mighty sorry I come here; but now I'm mighty glad. Good-night."

And they rode away, gradually disappearing in the gathering gloom.

The undertaker from Malconta came the next morning, bringing with him a shiny black walnut

coffin; and in it he placed the mortal remains of John Gaston. All that day and night—Saturday, and until ten o'clock the next forenoon, the casket stood in the spare room upon two chairs. To me it was a cold, unspeakable horror. Yet many times that dreary, rainy day I slipped into the room, stole a fearful glance at the awesome thing, and tiptoed out again.

That night, as I sat upon Bill's lap in front of the cheerful fire in the sitting-room—we were alone for the moment—idly counting the buttons upon his waistcoat and listening to the cold rain dashing against the window-panes and the wet wind soughing down the cavernous chimney, I asked timorously:

“Bill, do they ever bury live people?”

“Well, I'll be doggoned!” he exclaimed, taking his pipe from his lips and sharply eyeing me. “Tom Gaston, what ever made you ask such a question as that?”

“Well, *do* they?” I insisted.

“Course they don't!” he asserted positively.

“Don't never put 'em in a coffin, even?” I persisted.

“W'y jeeminy crickets—no! What's the matter with you, anyhow?”

“Don't they sometimes make a mistake, Bill—and—put folks in coffins and bury 'em when they only *seem* dead?”

“Well, dern me!” he ejaculated.

Then, after a few reflective whiffs at his pipe, he shrewdly inquired: “Who's been tellin' you anything like that, Tom?”

"Nobody," I answered, with a shake of the head.

"What made you think o' such a thing, then?"

"Don't know. Guess I just happened to think of it."

"I don't believe it. Who'd you ever hear talkin' any such talk as that?"

"I heard Granny Watson talking to Tildy."

"Jest what I thought—the ol' witch!" he growled into his whiskers. "She ort to have sense enough to be keerful!"

Again he smoked in silence for some time. At last he gently put me off his lap, placed his heavy hands on my shoulders, and said:

"Tom, you're nervous, an' bed's the place fer you. Don't you think no more 'bout such stuff. Granny's cracked—that's what ails *her*. A thing like you mentioned couldn't happen once in a million times. Now, skeedaddle off to bed. I'm goin' to brush up my go-to-meetin' duds fer to-morrer."

He left me alone, and I dropped down upon the hearth to remove my boots. The confused murmur of voices came to me from the ell and the kitchen. Then, of a sudden, a cat-like footfall sounded upon the floor just behind me. I turned my head and leaped to my feet—my heart in my mouth. There stood Granny Watson, grinning and gleefully rubbing her hands. I did not wait for her to speak, but with a boot in each hand made a dive for the foot of the stairs.

"Tom! Tom!" she screeched, shuffling after me, her claws outstretched. "It's all comin' out as I told you! Tom, come back; I want to tell you——"

I heard no more. I scampered up the stairway to my room, dropped my boots upon the floor, and clapped my hands over my ears. A few minutes later I became aware of the opening and shutting of the door leading from the sitting-room to the passage; and I heaved a sigh of relief. The old beldam had returned to her pipe and her stool by the kitchen fire. I went to bed, but I could not sleep. The idle clatter of the old crone that, by perversity of fate, I had chanced to overhear, kept ringing over and over through my brain. I thought of every awful thing of which I had ever heard, read or dreamed. I closed my eyes; and fleshless forms moved around my bed, noiselessly gibbering and gesticulating. I opened my aching orbs; the ghostly visitants were gone, but I fancied I heard eerie and mocking whisperings and laughter in the darkest corners of the room. I imagined myself in a trance and about to be placed in a coffin; and the picture I conjured was so vivid, so real, that I had difficulty in repressing a scream. A cold sweat bathed me from head to foot, and my flesh crept.

An hour, two hours passed, and still I was wide-eyed and restless. Vance came up and retired. I covered my head in an effort to shut out the unwelcome phantoms that peopled the enveloping gloom. But my ruse was a failure, and, thoroughly scared and miserable, I began to cry, softly, that I might not disturb my roommate.

"What's the matter, Tom?" he inquired immediately.

I was glad to hear his voice—glad that he was

awake and heard me. But I made no answer, and he arose and came over to me.

"What's the matter?" he repeated, gently uncovering my head.

His kindness touched me. A series of sobs was the only reply I could make.

"Tut-tut, Tom!" he said soothingly. "Tell me what's the matter."

"I—I'm afraid!" I blubbered.

"What of?"

"I don't want to—to tell you."

"Yes, tell me."

"I'm afraid of dying."

"Of *dying*? Are you sick?"

"N—o."

"What do you mean, then?"

"I'm afraid that when I die I'll—I'll be buried alive!"

"Afraid that you'll be buried alive when you die?"

He burst out laughing, but quickly checked himself, and, bending over me and tenderly patting my cheek, whispered comfortingly:

"You couldn't be buried alive if you were dead, Tom. You're just nervous, comrade—and no wonder. You've got a spell of the horrors. Come into my bed and sleep with me."

I needed no urging, no second invitation. I snuggled up to him, cold and nervous. He put his warm arms around me and soon I was fast asleep.

Sunday morning Ruth got time to see that I carefully washed and dressed myself. Afterward I

stood at the window and watched the pouring rain without, the horses and teams gathering at the gate, and the people alighting and stringing toward the house. They kept coming and coming. Soon the rooms of the dwelling were full to overflowing, and numbers had to take shelter from the rain in the barn and other adjoining farm buildings.

Sol Hathaway acted as master of ceremonies. At ten o'clock the, to me, tiresome services at the residence were over, and we set out for Hopewell church, where the funeral sermon was to be preached and the body of my father laid to rest in the little graveyard. I recall distinctly but one thing in connection with the exercises at the house on that wet Sunday morning—that I thought Ruth very pretty and very pitiful in her plain gown of black woolen cloth.

I rode to the church in the ancient rusty rock-away, that had come over the mountains from Pennsylvania, with Ruth and Tildy. Bill was our driver, and Vance and David, on horseback, immediately followed us. Granny Watson stayed at the house to look after the household affairs, and to prepare dinner for us, against our return.

That was a slow and monotonous journey—from John Gaston's temporal abode to his final resting-place in the wet and cheerless cemetery. All the way the rain fell steadily, drearily. The sky was sullen; the atmosphere, saturated; the earth, sodden. The frost was out of the ground, and the roads were almost impassable. The funeral cortège was more than half a mile in length. Slowly—very slowly, it wormed its way up the creek valley,

dragged itself up the hill to the Coon tavern, and wriggled along the bleak ridge to the church. A squat and ugly black hearse was the head of the grim monster, and a string of mud-bespattered vehicles and horseback riders was its sinuous and flexible body and tail.

I shall not dwell at length upon the rude services at the church, of which I observed little, and in which I took scant interest. My only concern was that the solemn and gloomy—and, to me, wholly distasteful—affair might be over with, and that we might be upon our homeward way. Suffice it to say this: John Gaston's funeral sermon as preached by Sol Hathaway was terse and to the point. The big and bluff preacher did not mince words—did not gloss over my father's faults and frailties. He fearlessly and mercilessly called a spade a spade, and seemed to take delight in his own brutal frankness—to consider it a commendable virtue, indeed. To use a backwoods expression of the day, he "preached the dead man straight into hell!"

"Let neighbor John Gaston's certain doom be a warnin' to us all!" he cried tragically. "He may have died penitent—none of us knows; but he died unforgiven—that's certain. An' his soul's damned an' lost! I hate to say it, my Christian friends—it sounds awful harsh, but I wouldn't be fulfillin' my duty as a minister o' the Gospel if I didn't say it! In our pity an' sorrer fer the dead we mustn't fergit our duties to the livin'—an' our r'sponsibility to God! May He have mercy on us all!"

Ruth winced at the words, and her face showed

deathly white as she lifted her veil to whisper something to Vance. He arose and softly raised the window near which we sat. It was plain that Ruth was suffering keenest mental anguish—that she had cared far more for my father than had I, wrongfully and cruelly as he had sought to treat her. Though she was not a professed Christian, she held to the belief of the church in future reward or punishment; and she was in agony at the announcement from one in authority that her uncle—the only father the poor girl had ever known—had passed from misspent time to an eternity of torment. Rendered faint and sick by the awful thought, she requested Vance to raise the window, that she might breathe more freely. Boy though I was, I understood her feelings. Ever afterward I hated Sol Hathaway—not so much because he had passed sentence upon my father, condemning the dead and defenseless man to perdition—as because he had needlessly caused Ruth pain.

All through the sermon Ryal sat with his eyes closed, his double chin sunk in his fringe of snowy beard, his fat fingers interlocked in front of him—aimlessly twirling his thumbs. In a way he and John Gaston had been friends for years, and the old abolitionist was deeply grieved over my father's lamentable downfall and death. Several times during the sermon he feelingly shook his head and wiped a trickling tear from the tip of his pink nose, and when the burly minister summed up the evidence and passed sentence upon my father David openly had recourse to his handkerchief.

Tildy wept in sympathy with Ruth; and Bill sat glum—an occasional twitching of the corners of his wide mouth alone marking his agitation. As for Vance, he maintained a mien of solemnity befitting the occasion—and anxiously observed Ruth.

The rain was still pouring down as we filed out of the church, took up our places at the side of the grave just to the rear of the gaunt, gray building, and watched the pallbearers lower the casket into the ground. Then, as the first shovelful of wet earth and shale rattled noisily upon the coffin lid, Ruth caught me to her breast and gave way to a fit of uncontrollable weeping.

“Take me away, Ruth—please take me away!” I pleaded, clinging to her and shivering with cold and nervous depression.

“Poor Tom! Poor boy!” she sobbed, kissing me—and wetting my cheek with her tears.

Vance came to us, put his arm around Ruth, and took me by the hand, and thus led us out of the gate and to our carriage.

Of my deplorable lack of feeling for my parent I will say no more. God knows it is not a pleasant thing to reflect upon!

That night as we sat around the fire—silent in the main, and each one busy with his own thoughts—I hitched my chair close to Bill’s, pulled him down and whispered in his ear:

“Bill, who owns the farm and things now?”

“Don’t know, Tom,” he breathed softly in reply, a startled expression upon his kindly face.

“Does David know?”

"Nope."

"Nor Vance?"

"Nope."

"Who does?"

"Probate judge, I reckon."

"Will he tell us?"

"Yep—guess so. Shut up now; rest of 'em might hear us."

I sat silently thinking over the matter for some time; but it was too much for me. I floundered beyond my depth in the sea of uncertainties, and gave up in despair. Then, on a sudden, it flashed upon me how big and empty the room seemed—how every slight sound was magnified, how strangely vacant was the chimney-corner, how loud the clock ticked. Why was it so—what did it mean? Ah, I missed my father's *presence*—that was all!

CHAPTER XIV

ON the Saturday following my father's funeral Vance, David and Ruth went to Malconta to learn the status of our affairs—hers and mine. None of us knew the exact provisions of my uncle's will, nor how my father's death might affect them. At any rate, Ruth was still under age and must choose a new guardian.

The three arrived in Malconta about nine o'clock in the forenoon, and went immediately to the office of Judge Iverts, a lawyer of ability and of more than local celebrity. He cordially welcomed them, a pleased smile upon his rubicund face, and went straight to business.

After a few minutes' talk with the three he said animatedly, gleefully, in fact:

"From what you tell me, this appears to be a case of unusual features, not to say complications. But I must know just how the will reads, and I'll run over to the probate's office and see for myself. Then I'll be able to give you an opinion of some sort. Make yourselves comfortable till I return; I won't be gone but a few minutes."

Half an hour later he returned, looking grave. Seating himself, he thoughtfully drummed the arms of his chair and chewed at an unlighted cigar for

some minutes. Then, without lifting his bowed head, he rolled his eyes upward to Ruth's face and asked abruptly:

"How old did you say you are, Miss Gaston?"

"Almost eighteen," was the quiet response.

"When's your next birthday?"

"The sixth of April."

"You'll have to choose another guardian to serve until you're of age in April. Who's your choice?"

"David!"

"Ryal?"—pointing a fat index finger at the old abolitionist.

Ruth inclined her head.

"All right—a good choice. We'll go over to the probate's office and have that attended to, presently. Now as to the will: I find that it has been properly and legally probated, and that its provisions are about as you stated. But—begging your pardon, young lady—it's the damnedest uncouth and unjust document I ever clapped eyes on. I don't know, of course, what construction the court may place upon it—it must go into court when you are of age—but I know what I'd do, if I were on the bench. I'd set the whole thing aside and give you what is your own, without any ado. But, as I said, I don't know—haven't the slightest idea, in fact—what the court may or will do in such a peculiar case. Let me ask you a few questions now."

He leaned forward, his elbows resting upon his knees, his hand and forefinger extended in Ruth's direction, and proceeded:

"The will provides that your uncle and guardian,

John Gaston, invest your money to suit his own will and pleasure. He is given absolute control of it—the legal right to use it as his own. That he has done, I suppose?”

“I suppose,” Ruth answered. “He never consulted me.”

“And you never interfered with his management of your estate?”

“No.”

“Never,” David could not keep from seconding. “The fact is, judge, her uncle never let her know, until recently, that the estate was hers. He gave her to understand that she was living on his bounty, and would have had her believe she was his child. But too many people knew something of the facts.”

“Yes—yes!”—Judge Iverts nodded, and viciously bit off and spat out the moistened end of his black cigar. Then he went on: “The will further provides that your uncle and testamentary guardian, John Gaston, provide for your wants and furnish you the means of an education. Has he done these things, Miss Gaston?”

“He provided for me as well as I could ask,” Ruth replied. “I have no cause for complaint.”

“And did he furnish you the means and opportunities of an education?”

“Y-e-s.”

“The manner in which you answer that question, my dear young woman, leads me to think you are holding something back. That won’t do. We’re going to have a fight on our hands, in all probability,

to obtain your rights. You must give me what I ask for. Now, did you and your uncle differ over that matter—your schooling?”

“Uncle John’s dead and gone,” Ruth said, the tears starting in her eyes, “and I don’t want to say anything against him.”

“But you *did* differ?”

“Y-e-s.”

“How was it? Tell me all about it.”

Ruth remained silent.

“I’ll tell you, judge,” David volunteered. “John Gaston was my friend, but I can’t let that fact stand in the way of Ruth’s rights. For the last two years he kept her out of school, to manage the household affairs. She ought to have gone—she wanted to go; but he wouldn’t let her—wouldn’t hear to it at all.”

“You can swear to that, Ryal?” Judge Iverts said quietly.

“Certainly.”

“Are there others who know of that fact?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Bill Kirk and Tildy Cramblett.”

“Neighbors?”

“No, hired-help.”

The lawyer turned to his table, took up his pen, and made some notes upon a slip of paper. That done, he coolly resumed:

“Now, Miss Gaston, the will also provides that your uncle and guardian—the two terms are associated all the way through the instrument—select

you a husband. It is not left optional with him. If he does not do so, he loses his one-half interest in the estate; and—a most flagrant injustice—you lose your one-half. Further, if you refuse to marry the man of his choice, you lose your share; and at the same time he loses his share. Under either circumstance the estate goes to the St. Francis hospital of New Orleans. Now, did your uncle fulfill his part of this strange and damnable provision—did he choose you a husband? ”

“ Yes,” Ruth made answer, her eyes downcast.

“ Do you hold yourself ready to marry this most favored of mortals, Miss Gaston? ”

And Judge Iverts laughed outright.

Ruth blushed and tapped the bare floor with the toe of her shoe, but made no reply. It was her first experience with lawyers and their embarrassing questions, and she was duly embarrassed. She saw, too, whither the conversation was leading; and she stole an appealing look at Vance. If only he would take the hint and leave the room!

“ Do you? ” the lawyer insisted.

“ No,” she managed to say.

“ Why? ”

As Judge Iverts asked this question, with the startling suddenness of a pistol shot, he eagerly leaned forward. His crouching attitude was the same he habitually assumed in the court-room when bullying a witness—his chair balanced on its two front legs, his elbows upon his knees, his right hand and forefinger extended, his handsome head wagging slowly.

"Let me answer the question, Judge," David interposed.

"No!" the lawyer growled, without removing his bold blue eyes from Ruth's flushed countenance. "Let the young woman answer it, Ryal; she probably knows better than you. Much may depend upon her answer. Again, Miss Gaston, why don't you stand ready to marry the man your uncle and guardian has chosen for you, according to the provisions of your father's will?"

"Because—because I don't love him," Ruth faltered.

Vance was growing impatient—indignant, almost. He was young, and inexperienced as to legal technicalities; and he could see no need of the lawyer's embarrassing questions. He got upon his feet, thrust his hands into his pockets, and strode over to the window. Judge Iverts turned upon him impatiently.

"Sit down, young man—or leave the room!" he cried. "You disturb me. These questions are important; and I can't be bothered."

Vance resumed his chair, scarcely knowing whether to be angry or amused.

The lawyer again turned his attention to Ruth and resumed calmly—a smile flickering around the corners of his mouth:

"Miss Gaston, your reason's a good one from the standpoint of tender sentiment, but it's hardly a sufficient one to carry into court. You may not know it—many people do not—but there's little sentiment in the decisions of a court of law. Now,

undoubtedly, there are reasons why you do not or cannot love the man your uncle has chosen for you—eh? ”

Without waiting for Ruth to frame an answer, David blurted out:

“ I’ll tell you why she can’t love him—can’t bear the thought of marrying him, Judge. Because he’s a drunken, violent, profane and dishonest black-guard! ”

Judge Iverts leaned back in his chair and indulged in hearty laughter.

“ Well, Ryal,” he said, wiping the tears from his eyes, “ I told you to keep still, but since you’ve broke in and said so much, you may say more. Who is this sweet-scented flower of manhood? ”

“ Marsh Colby’s his name, judge.”

“ O—h! ”

There was a world of meaning in the prolonged vowel sound and the manner of its utterance.

“ Do you know him? ” David asked quickly.

“ I know *something* of him,” the lawyer answered, shifting his unlighted cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other, “ and probably I’ll know a good deal *more* of him in the near future.”

Then to Ruth: “ So that’s the stripe of man your worthy uncle chose for you? I don’t wonder you refused to marry him. And I’ve learned recently that John Gaston’s character was not above reproach; that he was engaged in rather questionable practices—to use no harsher term. I’m aiding the county prosecutor in some criminal cases that will come before the grand jury at the March term.

You may guess at what I mean. My dear young lady, you may return home with your mind at rest. We'll knock that will higher than Gilderoy's kite. It was the evident intent and purpose of the testator, your father, to place his daughter in good hands, to have her carefully cared for and educated, and to have a proper husband chosen for her, thus guarding against her inexperience and protecting her from the wiles of the world. It was a silly, a criminal thing to do, but your father evidently had your interest at heart and thought he was acting for the best. The testamentary guardian, your uncle, was to be rewarded for faithful performance of duty; but he has proven derelict all the way through. According to the will, however, you must suffer for his shortcomings. Your father made a great mistake; we must see to it that the court rectifies the blunder. Your uncle, an immoral man himself, chooses an improper husband for you, and because you refuse to marry the scalawag you must lose what is rightfully yours. Then, John Gaston made a huge blunder. He could not legally choose a husband for you until you are of age. That will must not stand. I'll fight it along the lines indicated, and I'll win the battle, too. I'll have the whole damned thing set aside. I'll see to it that you get everything, that neither the hospital at New Orleans nor the heirs of John Gaston, if he has any, get a penny!"

"Won't—won't Tom get anything?" Ruth asked falteringly, in a tone of mingled pity and dismay.

"Tom?" the lawyer cried sharply. "Now, who the devil's *Tom*?"

"My cousin."

"Your guardian's son?"

"Yes, sir."

"Has he any brothers or sisters—this Tom?"

"No."

"And I believe you told me your aunt died ten years ago?"

Ruth nodded.

"How old's this Tom?"

"Twelve."

"And do you want him to have a part of your estate?"

"Indeed I do, Judge Iverts!"

"Well, by the eternal, he can't have it! You're my client, and it's my business to look after your interests—and yours alone. The only chance for you—unless you consent to marry that reprobate, Colby—is to have the will set aside. To do that means that you fall heir to everything—just as if there had been no will."

"Oh, I don't want it that way!" Ruth cried, wringing her hands in distress. "I'd rather give Tom all! I won't rob him—I won't!"

Judge Iverts slapped his thigh and laughed: "Well, well, well! That's a woman for you, I declare!"

Then, instantly sobering: "My dear young woman, there is no need of your robbing your cousin. When you have gained your rights you can do what you please with your property—give it

all to your cousin if you see fit. You understand? All right. But the first thing to do is to keep the estate out of the clutches of those who will, in all probability, assert a legal claim to it—the hospital authorities at New Orleans. Do I make my meaning plain? ”

Ruth smiled brightly—the tears shining in her eyes—in reply.

“ I guess she understands! ” David laughed.

“ Now, ” Judge Iverts resumed, “ things must go on according to the provisions of the will until you are of age, Miss Gaston. And, in the meantime, this young cousin of yours must have a guardian. He’s not old enough to choose one for himself—according to statute. Whom shall we suggest to the probate? ”

“ Chatham, there, ” David interjected, jerking a thumb in that silent individual’s direction.

“ Eh? ” the lawyer questioned.

“ I’m not a legal resident of the State, ” Vance objected.

“ You’re not a native of this State, then, Mr. Chatham? ” Judge Iverts remarked, wheeling in his chair to face the young man.

“ No, ” Vance replied, “ I’m a Kentuckian. ”

“ Ah! ” said the lawyer, with lifted brows and open stare. “ I see. You’re the young fellow that teaches school in the Hopewell district, that owns that fine saddle-horse. Oh, yes! You’ve been boarding at Gaston’s, I believe, eh? ”

Vance nodded stiffly.

“ Well, I hope to become better acquainted with

you later on, Mr. Chatham," Judge Iverts said, with a peculiar and meaningful intonation of voice.

Then he got upon his feet, stretched his arms above his head, and remarked yawningly—a mischievous twinkle in his bold blue eyes:

"Now I don't wonder, Miss Gaston, you won't consent to marry Marsh Colby. Let's go over to the probate's office."

They silently followed him to the court-house across the square—Ruth blushing and Vance angrily biting his nether lip.

The probate judge promptly appointed David guardian for Ruth; and, at Ryal's suggestion, appointed a Mr. Olderboy of the Citizens' bank—where there was five thousand dollars on deposit in my father's name—to serve in the same capacity for me. The bothersome business satisfactorily settled, my three good friends set out for home—where they arrived in time for supper.

That night, as we sat by the fire discussing the events of the day and the probabilities of the future, Bill remarked sleepily—paraphrasing his discourse with yawns:

"Maybe you folks think you had some bother an' trouble—an' maybe you did; but I'll bet a purty you didn't 'ave no such ride as I did, anyhow."

He waited a reasonable length of time for someone to accept his implied challenge, but, all remaining silent, he went on:

"Jest after you left this mornin' I went up into the woods to snake down a log fer firewood. I took Bess an' Dick an' a pair o' bobs. Ort to 'ave had

more sense 'n to take them two coltish critters—been standin' in the stable doin' nothin', an' was feelin' their oats mightily; but I didn't. Feller's hind-sight's alluz a good 'eal better 'n his foresight, I've noticed.

“Well, I got up there on top o' the hill an' picked out the log I thought I'd snake down—whole beech tree, purty nigh, without a limb on. I strained an' grunted—an' swore more 'r less, fer them two critters was full o' ginger an' wouldn't stand still—an' finally got the butt end o' the log chained onto the bobs. Then I picked up the lines, jumped a-straddle o' the log, an' clucked to the hosses. Ev'rything went all right till I struck a piece o' spouty ground, 'bout a fourth o' the way down the hill, where the water had froze. Fer a hundred yards 'r so that piece o' road was slicker 'n a tallered rainbow. The log begun to crowd the hosses; an' they wouldn't stand it. They tossed the'r heads, took a few jumps,—like a pair o' skeered rabbits,—got the bits in the'r teeth, an' away they went, lickety-brindle! Jeeminy! It was like droppin' from the clouds. Then the hosses shied out o' the road an' started right down through the timber. 'Bout one-third of the time I was on the log, an' the rest o' the time I was up in the air. It was worse 'n ridin' an earthquake. W'en I finally got 'em stopped an' back in the road, I was split clean up to my collar bone. Don't hanker fer no more rides like that—I don't.”

No one offered comment; and after a few lazy whiffs at his pipe Bill drawled reflectively:

"Lawyers is a set o' funny fellers, it 'pears to me. The'r consciences is stretchier 'n a strip o' wet rawhide; an' the'r ways an' the'r talk—an' 'specially the'r writin's—is harder to understand 'n the d'rections ol' Perdue Tillman put on his saw-logs.

"He hauled a lot o' logs down to Josh Bingham's saw mill on Bald Eagle, to have 'em sawed into stuff fer a picket fence. He was an ol' Quaker—an' didn't know no more 'n the law 'lowed; an' he was bullheadered 'n a pet ram.

"Ol' Josh says to him: 'Now, Perdue, you take this piece o' chalk an' mark on the ends o' them logs jest what you want 'em sawed into; an' mark y'r initials on 'em, too.'

"'I don't think that's at all necessary, Joshua,' says Perdue. 'Thee knows me, an' thee knows my logs; an' I can tell thee what——'

"'Look here, Perdue Tillman,' snorts ol' Josh, 'you do jest what I say—an' nothin' else. How'll I know y'r logs from anybody else's, if I happen to fergit where you've piled 'em; an' I can't remember what ev'rybody wants the'r logs sawed into. You take that chalk an' mark yours—that's what *you* do.'

"Well, Perdue took the chalk an' went out o' the mill, a-grumblin' an' a-theein' an' a-thouin'. Of course Josh c'ncluded the ol' feller'd gone an' marked up the logs all right; but he hadn't—not pr'cisely. An' w'en Josh come to saw the stuff the only marks he found on Perdue's logs was a big 'P. T.' scrawled on the end o' each one of 'em.

"So he sends fer Tillman, an' says—as sour as a bunch o' shoemake-berries:

"'Perdue, I thought I told you to mark y'r logs so's I'd know what you wanted 'em sawed into!'

"'I did mark em, thee knows,' answers Perdue.

"'You didn't, Perdue!'

"'I did, Joshua!'

"'Where?'

"'Right there.'

"'That P. T.?''

"'Of course.'

"'What's it mean?'

"'Doesn't thee know?'

"'Course not! It might mean Perdue Tillman; an' it might mean Polk Taylor, 'r Philip Tavner—both o' 'em's got logs here, too.'

"'Joshua,' says Perdue, mighty solemn-like, 'thee must be monstrous thick-headed! That's jest as plain as can be!'

"'Yes,' sneers Josh; 'plain as a Dutch riddle!'

"'It *is* plain!' hollers Perdue, gittin' madder an' madder.

"'Well, if it's so *dang* plain, what's it mean?' yells Josh. 'Spose the letters *does* mean y'r name, ther' ain't nothin' to show what you want made out o' the logs!'

"'There *is*!'

"'An' I say there *ain't*!'

"'Look!' bellers Perdue, an' he p'int's to the two letters. 'That's as plain as the coat I wear. P. T.—pickets fer Tillman!'

“ ‘Well, I swear!’ vows Josh.

“An’ he *did*; an’ he put on the frills an’ flourishes an’ finishin’ touches, too. Cussed till ol’ Perdue stuffed his fingers in his ears—an’ took to the woods.”

Then, after leisurely refilling and relighting his pipe, Bill concluded:

“An’ lawyers’ writin’s is ’bout as easy to read an’ understand as ol’ Perdue Tillman’s ‘P. T.’”

The fire had burned down; black shadows lurked in the obscure angles of the room. David was asleep in his favorite chair—in his accustomed position and attitude; and Tildy was nodding—sitting bolt upright.

“Might as well go to bed, I guess,” Bill remarked, arising and stretching. “Eh, ol’ sweetheart?”

And he tiptoed across the hearth and chucked Tildy under the chin. She awoke with a start that almost precipitated her to the floor, and, discovering who it was had roused her, cried out irritably:

“Won’t you *never* have no sense, Bill Kirk? Go on to bed—an’ b’have y’rself!”

He winked at her and deftly patted her plump red cheek. Then he sprang out of reach of the blow she aimed at him, and—followed by her wheezy giggle—went toward the kitchen, humming:

“My bark is on the biller, my home is far from you;
An’ with a sad an’ aching heart, I bid you now adieu.
I tell you that w’en far away upon the dark-blue sea,
W’en the wild waves wash my lonely deck, my heart shall be
with thee!”

The succeeding weeks of school passed swiftly, uneventfully. Each day Vance and I trudged to the gray schoolhouse on the hill, went through the usual routine, and returned home. Of nights we surrounded the glowing hearth—the women with their knitting or sewing, the men with their games—and chatted, and told tales and riddles. A pitcher of cider, a basket of nuts, and a pan of apples were indispensable adjuncts to our evening's enjoyment.

Ruth kept up her studies under Vance's tutelage, and progressed rapidly.

Ah, those hallowed hours of the long ago! My memory reverts to them, over and over. After my father's death and burial everything was happy and serene with us. Laughter and song and music brightened our days and lightened our nights; and all was well!

We neither heard nor saw much of Marsh Colby during that time. There was a persistent rumor afloat that the grand jury would investigate the horse-thieving cases at the March term of court; and, no doubt, Colby and his cronies thought it well to do nothing to call particular attention to themselves in any way.

During the severe weather of January and February no passengers traveled on the Underground. Vance kept a discreet tongue; would not, in fact, say a word on the subjects of slavery or abolition to anyone. And the feeling against him was gradually dying down. So passed the winter months, and the middle of March came—and with it the last day of school, and the spring term of court at Malconta.

CHAPTER XV

THE March term of court took David and Bill to Malconta. They had been subpoenaed to appear before the grand-jury as witnesses in the horse-stealing cases then under investigation; and they were still away from home when the last day of school arrived. I was greatly disappointed over their absence on this important occasion, strongly desiring them to be present to hear me speak the piece Vance and Ruth had taught me. However, I was comforted to a degree when Vance announced that he would close the exercises of the last day with a spelling-school at night. The prospective pleasure of a spelling-school went far toward compensating me for the absence of my two unwavering friends and admirers.

Of the social gatherings of the primitive community, spelling-schools were ranked among the first. Indeed, they were classed with dances—or “frolics,” as they were more frequently called; and, for genuine pleasure and amusement, were out-ranked by “big-meetings” only.

On the morning of that last day of school we four who were left at home were astir early. Vance and I did the milking and feeding, giving the stock enough fodder to last the whole day, while Ruth and Tildy prepared breakfast and put things to rights. Then, at eight o'clock, we had left the place to take care of itself and were on our way to the school-

house, Vance lugging a large basket containing our dinner and supper.

It was a clear, windy morning. The sun shone warmly and the air was balmy for the time of year. The frost was out of the earth, and the thirsty wind had licked up the moisture until the roads and bridle paths were dry and hard. The bluebirds had returned to their native haunts, and the woodpeckers were flitting from one dead treetop to another and rapping merrily. A crow perched on the topmost bough of a giant whiteoak bobbed and cawed to his companions winging the blue above him. From afar in the dense forest came the muffled whirl of a partridge's wings and the dull thud of a woodman's ax; and from the creek valley floated up the sound of a plowman's voice, turning the black loam of the bottoms. Winter was indeed over, and the harbingers of spring were on hand.

The forenoon at school passed as had passed all other forenoons of the term—nothing but the routine of studying and reciting lessons. But every boy had his face and neck and hands scrubbed, a rarity beyond precedent; and each girl was arrayed in her "best bib and tucker," as Bill Kirk would have expressed it. I thought I had never seen little Grace Harland look so clean and sweet and pretty. Her blue baby eyes were sparkling; her velvety cheeks were as rosy as red apples. All this I took note of as she demurely stood at my side, reading in a soft, lisping voice of the naughty lad who purloined the good farmer's fruit. She was about my own age and as plump and shy as a quail. I quickly

made up my mind that I admired her, liked her, from her neatly-laced calfskin shoes to the plaid ribbon that secured the end of the brown braid hanging down her back, checkered pinafore, glass beads and all; and I seriously considered whether I should not ask to see her home from spelling-school that night. But the sickening thought that she lived a mile beyond Hopewell church, and that I should have to return home alone, dampened my ardor; and the incipient flame of boyish love went out.

Poor Grace! For forty years, almost, she has been sleeping under the sod of the old country graveyard where rest so many I knew and loved. But no more! *That*, indeed, is another story.

Visitors kept dropping in by ones and twos, and after the extra-long noon intermission the concluding exercises of the day, consisting of compositions and declamations, began.

Those old-time declamations — “Rienzi’s Address,” “Bingen on the Rhine,” “Antony’s Oration,” “Casabianca,” “Harry and the Guidepost” — I shut my eyes and hear them yet! And without an effort of the will the scene rises before me: the awkward, gangling, backward boys; the blushing, bashful, giggling girls; the dignified and patient young teacher; the assembled visitors, eager, expectant, solicitous, admiring—and I am back there again, bravely striving to do my part in the programme!

What difficulty Ruth had in maintaining a sober countenance when Janey Talbot read her composition, “Feathered Fowls”! It began: “There is

many kinds of birds—the chippy, the wren, the rooster and the ostrich.” And how valiantly all struggled with their emotions when big Bob Bishop, fifteen years old, recited in lugubriously whining and pathetic tones:

“ I like to see a little dog
An’ whack him one fer sport.
How purtily he wags his tail,
W’en it is bobbed off short!

“ Some little dogs is very good
An’ very useless, too;
An’ do you know they will not mind
One thing they’re bid to do?

“ Then I will never feed my dog—
The grub might give him pain.
Poor feller! I will beat him good—
An’ he will love me then!”

Dear, happy-hearted and quaintly-original Bob Bishop! He would have parodied “The Lord’s Prayer” with equal fervor and enjoyment. He sleeps down at Pittsburg Landing.

But the explosion that shook the building came when cross-eyed Owen Taylor, a generous quid of tobacco bulging one cheek, gave:

“ I’ll never use tobacker—no!
It is a filthy weed;
I’ll never put it in my mouth!
Said little Robert Reed.”

My recitation was “The Young Soldiers,” and I smeared myself all over with glory. I know I did, for Ruth and Tildy assured me of the fact afterward.

This is how I led off:

“Oh, were you ne’er a schoolboy,
And did you never train,
And feel that swelling of the heart
You ne’er can feel again?
Didst never meet far down the street,
With plumes and banners gay,
While the kettle for the kettle-drum
Played the march, march away?”

There I stood, stiff as the proverbial ramrod, my shoulders squared, my arms primly at my sides, my fingers outspread. I have a mental picture of how I must have looked. My short pea-jacket barely reached to the waistband of my baggy trousers. It was unbuttoned, and my checkered flannel shirt and knit suspenders obtrusively presented themselves. My trousers’ legs were tucked inside the tops of my copper-toed cowhide boots, and my weather-bleached hair was bobbed off straight across the nape of my neck. Then, I remember how I *felt*! My heart throbbed suffocatingly, my head swam, my limbs trembled. The sea of craning necks, eager faces and open mouths floated hazily in front of me. I hardly knew my own voice as it piped and faltered through the first stanza. But no one frowned at me, no one laughed at me—which I dreaded much more; and I took courage. My knees ceased to knock together, my voice gained in power and steadiness, until I recognized it as my own. Gradually the faces in front of me grew distinct and clear to my gaze; and I discovered that each wore a kindly and encouraging expression. My spirits

rose—I became elated, jubilant; and when I reached the place where:

“We charged upon a flock of geese
And put them all to flight,
Except one sturdy gander
Who thought to show us fight!”

I rose upon my toes, tragically waved my sword hand, and screamed:

“But ah, we knew a thing or two!
Our captain wheeled the van.
We routed 'em! We scouted 'em!
Nor lost a single man!”

Dear, dear! It was all very silly, all very boyish, no doubt. But at the time it seemed proper and admirable. And, as it belongs to the roses and rue of the springtime of life, it seems so still—to me.

The afternoon swiftly wore away. Vance concluded the exercises by presenting each of us with a picture-card bearing the teacher's autograph and the scholar's name. Mine is before me on the table as I write. It is among my most cherished mementoes; and it reads:

REWARD OF MERIT.
Presented to *Thomas Gaston*,
By *Vance Chatham*,
Teacher.

Finally, Vance made a short speech, in which he bade us good-by, wished us happy and successful

lives, thanked the visitors for their attendance and attention—and dismissed us.

The scholars hastily gathered up their books, dinner baskets, and other belongings, and scurried for their homes—chattering and laughing as they went. Many of them lived two or more miles from the schoolhouse; and they had to traverse that distance, help with the evening chores, eat their suppers, and return in time for the spelling-school. As may be readily understood, they had no moments to waste, and they loitered not by the way.

We four of our own family were left alone. The sun was sinking in the west, a red and fiery ball; and the schoolroom was growing dusky. Vance went to Granny Watson's spring, a quarter of a mile away, and brought a pail of fresh water. Then we seated ourselves around the hearth and partook of our supper of bread and butter, cold fried sausage, and doughnuts and pie. After which we sprinkled and swept the floor, replenished the fire, pushed the desks against the side walls and arranged the benches in front of them in continuous lines—leaving a broad aisle lengthwise of the building; and placed a row of lighted candles around the room. All that done, my three companions sat down and talked quietly of the events of the day. But I was excited, and impatient for the return of my schoolmates; and I loitered from one part of the room to another, my ears cocked for the sound of familiar footsteps and voices.

Seven o'clock found the schoolroom well filled with pupils and visitors and others still coming. Vance

rapped the gathering to order, and appointed two of the older scholars—a boy and a girl—to “choose up.” This favored pair took seats at the end of the room farthest from the door, one on each side of the great fireplace, and chose alternately from the assembly. And those thus selected found places on the benches along the side walls. The best spellers were picked first, of course. The rivalry between the two leaders was keen, the choosing was quick and spirited; and the lines of spellers rapidly extended.

It was a recognized rule that all chosen must spell; few excuses were considered valid. Knowing this—and not desiring to take part, I plucked a comrade’s sleeve—Ted Harland’s; and we two crawled under one of the rows of desks. But presently our names were called; the leaders knew we were present. I nudged Ted, and Ted nudged me; and we shook with impish merriment—but neither answered to his name.

“Tom,” I heard Vance say, “you take your place on the right; and, Ted, on the left.”

Then, after a momentary silence:

“Why, where are those two boys?”

The situation was irresistibly funny to my companion and me; and we stuffed our fists into our mouths to keep from laughing aloud and chuckled and choked. Did you ever notice that when, for any reason, you should *not* laugh, you simply *must* laugh? It is one of the unexplainable things in human nature.

Vance spoke once more: “Tom—Ted, where are you?”

For a full half minute all was silent as the grave. Then a whining voice broke the stillness, saying:

"I think I know where they are, teacher."

It was that detestable putty-faced Zeke Davis, my rival for the smiles and favors of Grace Harland, the most dishonorable and unprincipled telltale in the school. Oh, how I hated him at that moment and longed to get at him! My fingers fairly itched with desire to pull his flaxen hair and scratch his pasty features. I breathed hard and dug my nails into my palms.

"The sneak!" Ted hissed into my ear. "If he tells on us, we'll fix him w'en spellin'-school's out!"

"Never mind, Zeke," we heard Vance say. "I think I know where they are, too. You have been chosen; take your place."

I felt that it was all up with Ted and me; I knew Vance had read the secret of our hiding-place in Zeke's milky eyes.

Someone clumped heavily across the floor and dropped into a seat. It was Zeke, I guessed. Then a hand invaded our place of fancied security, felt over me and fastened upon my collar. The next moment I was ignominiously dragged forth, dusty and disheveled, and jerked to my feet. Ted quickly followed me—in the same hasty and undignified manner, and, amid roars of laughter, Vance marched us to our respective places. Then and there I registered a vow to do for Zeke Davis!

When all who could or would spell had been chosen and had found places along the sides of the room—a

few of the older persons present declining to take part on the pretexts of hoarseness or inability to hear distinctly—Vance remarked:

“We’ll spell for an hour. At the end of that time, we’ll have a five minutes’ recess; and after that we’ll spell down. Now, choose your monitors. The side that gains the greater number of words from the other, in an hour, will be the victors in the first contest.”

The side on which I had been chosen selected the teacher from the Hickory ridge district as monitor; and the other side, on which was Ted Harland, made choice of Ruth for the same office. The duty of these “monitors” was to spell all the words missed by the opposing side.

Vance commenced to pronounce from the old “Elementary Spelling-Book,” and everybody gave ear, as one word after another rang distinctly from his lips. But I was out of sorts and took little interest. I was thinking of the perfidy of Zeke Davis, and how I would revenge myself upon him when the spelling-school was out. True to his promise given at Bailey’s sale the autumn before, Vance had taught me the elements of the manly art of boxing.

So I had no fear of a trial of skill and courage with my enemy, though he was two years the older and several inches the taller. Indeed, I was impatient to meet him in battle array; and my mind persistently dwelt upon the coming encounter, the pummeling I meant to give him. I missed almost every word that came to me; and, in consequence,

received several severe looks from Vance, and at last a sharp rebuke that threw me into red-faced confusion. After that I collected my wits and strove to do better.

But our side was fated to be beaten. When the hour was up, Vance announced that our opponents had gained thirty-nine words off us and that we had gained but thirty-two off them. It was with glum and surly expressions that we arose from our seats when dismissed for recess. Our opponents, of course, were jubilant, and amused themselves at our expense all through the intermission.

After recess the spellers resumed their places and stood up to "spell down." The unfortunate who misspelled a word dropped into his seat, and had no further part in the contest. Vance requested the teacher from Hickory ridge to take the spelling-book and give out the words, saying:

"You'll confer a favor by doing so. I want this final trial to be absolutely fair and impartial; and I might, unconsciously, favor my own scholars."

We spelled along for quite a while, a victim dropping here and there, but the ranks standing firm and thinning very slowly. I had regained my interest, was eager and alert, and was battling nobly for our side. At last the teacher pronounced the word "courier." Like a bludgeon flung from a giant's hand, it came hurtling down our line, bowling over one after another until it reached me. Twenty or more had gone down before it—many without a struggle, a blind fatalism convincing them that their time had come. I knew how to spell the word—and

I *knew* that I knew how to spell it; yet I turned pale and stood silent.

"Can you spell it, my boy?" the teacher asked, kindly.

I nodded, gulped once or twice, and began:

"C-o-u——"

I hesitated. I knew how to spell that word—of course I did! But was there one "r" or two "r's" in it? My momentary hesitation had confounded me!

"Well?" the teacher remarked questioninglly.

I began again—and with a spurt of sheer desperation went through with it:

"C-o-u-r-i-e-r, courier!"

I dared not raise my eyes from the floor. Then, amid breathless silence, I heard the teacher pronounce another word; and I knew I had stopped the verbal projectile that had threatened the total annihilation of our forces. Inch by inch, I elevated my nose, and looked around me. Vance gave me an approving nod; and Ruth, a tender and appreciative smile.

The struggle went on. Soon a many-syllabled missile floored our opponents by the dozen, ricocheted to our side, came tearing down our decimated line, and—when finally stopped—left but three standing of all the hosts that had entered the contest. Ruth stood alone on the opposite side; and a young woman from Hickory ridge and I were the sole survivors in our part of the field.

For five minutes the teacher sought to down us, strenuously turning from one page of the spelling-book to another.

"Fascinate," he pronounced to Ruth, at last.

"F-a-s-s-i-n-a-t-e," she spelled unthinkingly.

Then, aware at once that she had missed the word, she gave a start and sank into her seat, covered with confusion.

"Next," the teacher cried heartlessly, a hint of exultation in his voice and manner. Already he was sniffing victory for his own school.

It was now the turn of the young woman from Hickory ridge.

"F-a-s, fas; i, fasi; n-a-t-e, nate—fasinate," she articulated glibly and distinctly.

"Next," the teacher said slowly and reluctantly, the light of prospective triumph fading from his face.

I was in a quandary. We had had the word in our spelling-lesson a few days before. I recalled that there were a "c" and an "s" in it; but which preceded the other I could *not* recall. If I could stumble upon the combination of letters composing the pestiferous word, the bird of victory would rest with our side, our school—perched upon my banner! If I should fail, we three must again arise and renew the struggle for supremacy. The thought of the responsibility resting upon me made me dizzy—robbed me of my wits, almost.

"F-a——" I began hesitatingly.

In every emergency I had been in the habit of looking to Ruth, for help—if I looked to anyone. Now, in this moment of dire extremity, my eyes involuntarily sought her. She sat leaning anxiously forward, her slim brown hands pressed between her

knees, her red lips apart, her gaze riveted upon my face. As she caught my appealing look, she started—and understood my difficulty at once. Slyly she extended a taper index finger, and—as one writes upon a frosted pane—gave its tip a serpentine movement, thus representing an “s.”

The next second I spelled triumphantly: “F-a-s-c-i-n-a-t-e, fascinate!”

“Correct!” announced the Hickory ridge pedagogue, surlily tossing the spelling-book upon Vance’s desk.

The contest was over; and I was the hero of the occasion. Many of my own district flocked around me, shook my hand, and poured flattering encomiums into my ear; and others, whose sympathies were not with me, cast wondering and admiring glances at me from a distance. Vance gravely congratulated me—though I fancied that I saw, or *did* see, a humorous twinkle in his eyes as he turned away; and Ruth and Tildy took me in their arms and kissed me, in spite of my blushes and protests.

For many years my unexampled achievement was pointed to as a high-water mark; and whenever spelling-schools were the subject of conversation, someone was sure to remark how “Tom Gaston, w’en he wasn’t more ’n twelve years old, spelt down all the best spellers in three ’r four districts.” But, on such occasions, I always showed a commendable modesty by remaining silent!

When I escaped, finally, from the silent stares of admiration which were embarrassing, and whispered words of praise and congratulation which were over-

whelming, I cast a hurried glance around for Zeke Davis. I had not forgotten nor relinquished my purpose of chastising the sneak.

People were donning their things and trooping toward the door. The despicable Zeke was nowhere in sight; undoubtedly he had taken his departure. And where was my true and worthy comrade, Ted Harland? He might be without, alone doing battle with our enemy! The thought made my face burn, and sent me crowding and elbowing toward the place of exit.

"Wait for me at Granny Watson's," I heard Vance say to Ruth and Tildy, as I was worming my way into the mass of humanity surging through the doorway; "I'll be along in half an hour or so. I have to pack my books and put things in shape here. You'll want to talk to Granny a little while, anyhow."

Then I was engulfed in the maelstrom—and the next thing I knew I was in the open air. It was very dark, although the stars were shining in the cloudless heavens. I rubbed my eyes, and stumbled this way and that. People were moving all about me, jostling one another and exclaiming and laughing; but I could distinguish neither the form nor the features of anyone. Presently my sight began to grow accustomed to the sudden change from light to darkness, and I could make out the outlines of persons moving about me.

Just then a hand plucked my sleeve, and Ted Harland's voice whispered in my ear:

"He's hidin' right out the road here, a little ways.

The coward! Come on, Tom; we'll give it to him!"

He led the way at a brisk run, and I unhesitatingly followed, with difficulty keeping him in view as he dodged through the crowd. A few yards, and we were in the middle of the road and racing side by side.

"Where is he?" I panted.

"Right out here a little piece," he replied guardedly, without slacking his pace.

We continued to run a few minutes longer. Then Ted paused and whispered:

"Here's where I follered him to. W'en he stopped I went back after you. But I guess he's gone; don't see anything of him. Le's go one a piece further."

I consented; and we followed the byroad for quite a distance, going in the direction of Ted's home and away from my own. Finally I stopped and said:

"Now I'm going back."

"What fer?"

"Zeke's gone on home."

"Well, maybe we can ketch him."

"No, we can't. And I must go back; ev'rybody's going home—and Vance 'll be leaving the school-house pretty soon."

"All right, then," my companion answered in disappointed, dissatisfied tones. "But we'll lick him some other time—if it's fifty years from now!"

But we never *did* lick him. Poor, despicable Zeke! That spring his family moved from our neighbor-

hood—went over into Noble county. The next time I saw him was in front of Atlanta. They were carrying him to the rear, shot through both lungs and breathing his last. I didn't even *think* of licking him!

Ted and I set out to retrace our steps, but we had gone but a short distance when we met Ted's crowd on their way home. He bade me a cheery good-night and went with them, and I made my feet fly toward the schoolhouse.

On reaching the school-ground I found it deserted. Lanterns were twinkling up and down the road and across the fields. Everybody had gone; not a soul was in sight. But the schoolhouse door stood open, and I could hear Vance moving things to rights within.

I stopped near the woodshed, took off my cap, wiped the moisture from my forehead and drew a deep breath of relief. I had been desperately afraid that Vance would be gone. As with most boys of my age, though scorning to acknowledge it, darkness was more or less of a bugaboo to me, especially far away from my own doorsill.

Just as I had replaced my cap upon my head and had started toward the light streaming from the open door of the schoolhouse, there came to my ears, from the woodshed, the sound of shuffling feet and whispering voices. I stepped forward, vaguely wondering what my discovery might mean, laid an ear to a crack, and caught these startling words:

"I tell you I know what I'm talkin' 'bout! I slipped up to a winder an' peeked in. There wasn't

anybody in there but him. Ev'rybody else's gone long ago. This is our chance—an' our *only* one; an' if you three fellers is 'feared, w'y, jest leave one o' the shotguns with me, an' clear out. I'll do the job alone! But ther' ain't nothin' to be 'feared of. Nobody knows we're in three miles o' here—an' never *will* know. They'll find him dead—an' that'll be all they'll ever find out! John Gaston's gone; he can't turn State's evidence. The ol' drunken fool! An' ther's nobody left that re'ly knows anything that'll hurt us, but this young dandy. Some people may *guess*, but guesses won't c'nvict nobody. Le's git red o' this cuss while we've got a good chance, an' we're all right. If we don't—well, we can make up our minds to leave the country, as Shep's done; 'r take our medicine. What d' you say, fellers? Speak right out in meetin'; we're all in the same boat!"

It was Marsh Colby's voice; and undoubtedly his three companions were members of the old gang of horse-thieves. I was thoroughly frightened—horried, indeed—at the revelation of their presence and purpose. My first impulse was to dash, screaming, toward the schoolhouse, thus giving Vance warning of the contemplated attack upon his life; but native sense reasserted itself, and native cunning came to my rescue and saved me from so fatal a blunder. Stealthily I tiptoed away from the woodshed and to the schoolhouse door. Then, with a few light bounds, I was at Vance's side.

Breathlessly I poured my message of warning into his ear. Most of the candles had expired in their sockets and the fire was burning dim; but I saw his

face go pale and his jaws set as he listened. However, to all outward appearances he remained cool and collected. And when I had finished he said steadily:

"Four to two is pretty big odds, Tom;"—I noted that he counted me in, and I was pleased and flattered—"and I guess we'd better not have any trouble with them, if we can avoid it. From what you tell me, I judge they're drunk and desperate. We'll put out the lights and fasten the door. Maybe they'll think we've left, and go about their business. I don't care to have any trouble with them—under the circumstances."

His Southern drawl was marked as he uttered the last sentence, his head bowed musingly.

I dropped upon a bench near the fire, excited and quivering. Vance blew out the remaining candles—leaving the room in semi-darkness, excepting a faint halo of light around the hearth—and shut and bolted the door.

"It might be well; I guess I'll do it," I heard him mutter to himself. And then he piled a number of heavy desks one upon another against the door.

As he returned to my side, the subdued, wavering light from the smoldering fire glinted upon his revolver, which he held in his hand.

Five—ten minutes we waited, neither speaking but both listening intently. At the end of the time Vance whispered:

"You're sure, Tom—sure you heard what you told——"

He did not finish the sentence. Someone was cau-

tiously trying the latch of the door. Then came a resounding knock; and Colby's voice arose, saying:

"We know you're in there, Chatham—you dirty coward! You can't fool us! Open the door and come out; and we'll fight you fair."

 We neither stirred nor made reply.

The sound of low-pitched conversation was followed by a few moments of complete silence; and, immediately afterward, a heavy object crashed against the door, jarring the building, and rattling the window-panes.

"The scoundrels are up to mischief, Tom," Vance whispered, getting upon his feet and moving toward the entrance.

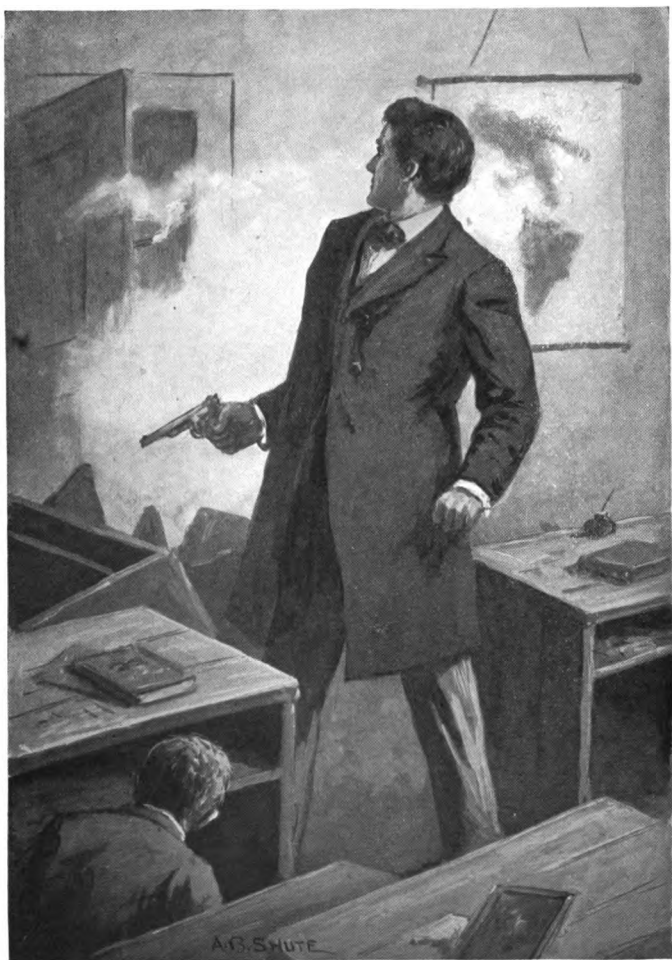
I started to follow him, half whimpering. He turned and motioned me back, giving me a gentle push. Then he took up a position at one side of the doorway, and called out:

"Colby, I've been warned; and I know what you're here for—I know what you're intending to do to me. I'm prepared for you. If you try to come in here, I'll kill you!"

The thunderous report of a gun followed. The heavy charge of shot split the panel of the door and splintered the desks behind it, sending the top one crashing to the floor.

"The devils mean murder, Tom!" Vance called softly. "Down behind the benches—out of the way of shot!"

I obeyed promptly and unhesitatingly. Vance stood his ground, his revolver ready for instant use.



“I saw Vance stagger backward a few steps—”

1. 2. 3.

Without delay the heavy body again struck the frail barrier—and again, and again.

The bolt gave way, the pile of desks slid and toppled; and the door was forced open a few inches.

Into the opening thus made a gun was thrust and discharged. I felt—rather than saw—Vance start, and stagger backward a few steps. Then his revolver cracked twice, the shots ringing out in quick succession. A roar of rage, an unearthly groan, the fall of a heavy body—and silence, followed rapidly; then came the sound of retreating footsteps.

Vance returned to the fireplace, and said:

“I think they’re gone, Tom; you can come out.”

His voice sounded weak and hollow. He kicked a charred faggot into the red coals, and it burst into a blaze. By the light it shed I saw that his left arm hung limp at his side and that the fingers of that hand were dripping blood.

“Oh, Vance, you’re shot!” I wailed.

“Just a scratch, Tom,” he murmured. “Bring me a drink.”

I hastened to fetch a cup of water from the pail near the door. When I again reached his side he had dropped into a seat and was looking very white and strange. I proffered him the water. He laid down his revolver and reached for the cup; but, ere he could take it, his head fell forward and he slid heavily to the floor.

I do not know what I did first, but I know what I *thought* first. Vance was dead or dying, and Ruth must come to him. All fear of the danger without—all dread of the darkness—instantly left me. I

have no recollection of how I moved the heavy desks from the door and got it open; but I do recall distinctly that I stumbled over a warm, limp body lying upon the step, that I scrambled to my feet and ran like the wind—guided by instinct more than sight—down the road toward Granny Watson's.

On reaching the hut I fell against the door and burst into the room, carrying consternation with me.

Ruth was very white, but very calm, as I finished my brief and broken tale of horror and stood wringing my hands and piteously begging her to hurry to Vance's aid. A few minutes later she and Tildy and I were again at the schoolhouse, and she had the unconscious man's head in her lap and was bathing his face and listening to his faint breathing.

"He's not dead," she announced; "he's just fainted from loss of blood. Bring me some more water, Tildy; and, Tom, let me have your knife."

She slit up his sleeve, exposing a ragged flesh wound from which the blood was oozing in a dark stream. His clothing was saturated, and great clots fell from his garments as she ripped them open. It was a grewsome sight. But Ruth bravely washed the wound and bandaged it with her own and Tildy's handkerchiefs, her brown fingers trembling but resolutely doing their unwonted task.

I had loved her always; at that moment I adored and worshiped her.

Presently Vance's eyelids twitched, and he moaned and stirred uneasily. Then, of a sudden, his eyes flew open and he struggled to a sitting posture, wildly staring.

"Vance," Ruth said softly, gently restraining him.

The light of returning reason dawned in his countenance as he looked upon her.

"Why, little girl, you here?" he murmured tremulously. "I—I must have fainted. How silly of me! I'm all right now, though! Who let you know—who brought you here?"

"Tom," she answered, glancing in my direction. "You're wounded, Vance."

"Yes, I know. The loss of blood made me swoon, I suppose. Why, you've bandaged up my arm, Ruth."

"Yes. Don't you think you'd better lie down? You may faint again."

"No, I'm all right. Give me your arm."

Ruth and Tildy assisted him to a bench.

"I'll take that drink of water now, Tom," he remarked, smiling feebly. "My, how my head whirls!"

"Please lie down again, Vance!" Ruth pleaded anxiously.

"No," he said obstinately; "it's passing off. I'll be as good as new in a few minutes."

But his voice and appearance did not warrant his words. He drank the water I brought him; then sat silent for a little while, his uninjured arm across the top of a desk, his head pillowed upon it.

Ruth stood observing him, her hand upon his shoulder, her soul in her sweet brown eyes. He slightly turned his head and touched his pallid lips to the caressing hand. She did not change countenance, but tenderly patted his cheek.

"Well, Tom?" he said suddenly. "Out with it."
I started and met his gaze.

"Out with it," he repeated.

Instinctively I knew what he meant, and I cast an appealing glance at Ruth. She took her cue; and, placing her arm around his neck and laying her cheek against his, she said chokingly:

"You—you killed one of them, Vance!"

"I know it," he answered, nodding. "I heard him groan and fall. I'm very sorry; but it was kill or be killed. Is it Marsh?"

"I don't know," she replied, dropping upon her knees at his side, and covering her face with her hands and shuddering.

"I'll go and see!" Tildy cried sturdily.

And she caught up the bit of candle Ruth had lighted, and waddled boldly to the door. There she stood for a moment, holding the light aloft and bending forward and peering into the outer darkness. When she returned she said caustically:

"Yes, it's that good-fer-nothin' Marsh; an' all I've got to say is that it's good riddance o' bad rubbish. Pity you didn't kill more of 'em!"

"I'm glad I didn't have to," was all the reply Vance made to her outburst.

Half an hour later we had him at Granny Watson's, in bed. His arm was paining him severely—occasional spasmodic contractions of his features revealed as much, but he said pluckily:

"Now, Ruth, I'm all safe and comfortable for the night. The rest of you find places and lie down. Tom can sleep on the other side of the bed with me;

and if I want anything, I'll have him call you. In the morning I must have a doctor, I suppose."

Ruth nodded, but said nothing, and she and Tildy withdrew to the small kitchen. Granny went puttering from one place to another, wagging her head and mumbling to herself—and keeping me on a bed of nettles by shooting occasional dagger-like glances at me and whispering: "Trouble, Tom! I told you so—I told you so."

After a while Tildy returned to the apartment alone.

"Where's Ruth?" Vance inquired immediately.

"Gone fer the doctor," Tildy replied coolly.

"What!" he cried aghast.

"Yes," she went on unconcernedly, "she wouldn't hear to nothin' I said. You must have a doctor—an' right away to-night. Said you might lose y'r arm by waitin' till mornin'. I wanted 'er to let me go with 'er an' git one o' the neighbors to fetch the doctor, but she said she could have him here in half the time they could. An' I guess she's right! Jest lay down there, now, an' don't go to worryin' y'rself into a fever. She's able to take keer of 'erself. She took y'r revolver with 'er, anyhow. Don't go to stewin'!"

He fell back on the pillow and sighed resignedly. Then he placed a hand over his eyes and lay silent, but I saw the tears trickling down his cheeks.

How Ruth went alone to our stable at midnight and saddled and bridled Kaintuck, mounted the noble animal and galloped away to Malconta, seven miles distant, I shall not attempt to describe in common-

place prose. Such deeds of daring for love's sweet sake deserve to be sung in heroic verse. Long afterward she told me of how she came upon three slouching figures, halfway between our house and Colby's furnace, and of how they slunk into the bushes along the side of the road as she rode up to them; of how she called to Marsh Colby's hands at the furnace, told them of the horror at the schoolhouse, and got cursed by the louts for her pains; of how, on the streets of Malconta, a crowd of drunken roisterers sought to stop her and offended her ears and her modesty with their ribald songs and indecent jests; of how she brought old Dr. Abbott up the valley at the fastest pace he ever traveled; and of how—but enough.

At three o'clock in the morning their hoof-beats awoke me as I sat dozing in my chair.

CHAPTER XVI

VANCE made a rapid and complete recovery. An entire change of sentiment took place, in his favor. With the death of Marsh Colby the prosecution of the cases against the horse-thieves was dropped, the three leaders being beyond the reach of the strong arm of the law. The other members of the band, in time, became more or less useful and respectable citizens; and soon "Shep Dickson's gang" was but a memory.

Ruth's lawyer had little difficulty in establishing her right to all the property representing the money left her by her father, and in June she came into possession of it. Also, it was decided that there was eight thousand dollars belonging to me as my father's heir, money made and saved by him. Mr. Olderboy declining to serve longer as my guardian, David was appointed in his stead.

In the latter part of June—bonny June, the month of love and roses!—Vance and Ruth were married at our home, Sol Hathaway officiating. The guests were a few tried neighbors and friends—including Judge Iverts of Malconta.

It was noticeable that Bill Kirk was dressed that day as never before. He wore a full suit of black and shiny broadcloth, a white shirt, and collar and tie. In addition, his hair and beard were carefully oiled and scented and combed; and his boots were

polished until "you could see babies in 'em"—to use his own expression. As for Tildy—good natured, loyal, giggling, snappy Tildy!—she was gorgeously resplendent in a new black silk and a beatific smile.

A breathless hush fell upon us all as the young couple stood up to be married; and I, for one, felt that it was a very solemn occasion—more solemn than I liked. For some unexplainable reason, it recalled my father's funeral to my mind; and I felt a strong desire to escape by dashing out the open door. But the ceremony commenced, and the absurd thought left me.

I fastened my eyes on the participants and coolly observed everything. How handsome—really handsome—and manly Vance looked in his suit of genteel black; and how dainty and sweet and childish was Ruth in the robe of clinging white stuff that enveloped her slender, graceful form! At sight of them standing there facing the preacher—Vance so sturdy and self-reliant, Ruth so timorous and trustful—and at sound of the serious questions and promises, I felt the tears welling to my eyes. I glanced around the room and discovered that others were as deeply affected as I. Some of the women were slyly dabbing handkerchiefs to their cheeks; Tildy was openly sniffing; and Judge Iverts and David were gulping down lumps that would rise in their throats in spite of their affected unconcern.

When the simple and touching ceremony was over and the couple was receiving the congratulations of

those assembled, I went forward with the others. Vance gave me a hearty handshake and one of his good-humored smiles; but Ruth bent and kissed me.

Then it was that Bill Kirk stepped up to them and, drolly laughing and winking, said loud enough for all to hear:

"Mr. an' Mrs. Chatham, I want to offer you my c'ngratulations an' wish you much happiness. Then I want to ask you both a question. One good turn d'serves another, don't it?"

"It surely does, Bill," Vance replied, while Ruth stood blushing and smiling, knowing well that some nonsense was coming.

"Well, then," Bill went on slowly and impressively, "our accounts stands 'bout this way, I guess: I've trigged up in my best an' come to *your* weddin'; an' now I want to know if you folks is ready to do the same fer *me*—eh?"

"Certainly, Bill," Vance laughed. "But when?"

"*This blessed minute!*" was the astounding assertion.

Ere any of us could grasp his meaning he had taken a folded paper from his pocket, handed it to the preacher and caught Tildy by the hand; and long before we had recovered from our unbounded and pleasurable surprise the second ceremony was over and Bill Kirk and Tildy Cramblett were man and wife.

"Sol," Bill remarked, "you didn't say nothin' 'bout s'lutin' the bride, but I guess I'll do it, anyhow."

Tildy demurred and a slight struggle ensued, but Bill came off conqueror, leaving his new-found better half in a flushed and rumped condition.

"Bill Kirk," she cried, "you hain't got a mite more sense 'n you *used* to have!"

And she dealt him a playful box on the ear and covered her face and tittered.

We laughed and roared, and clapped our hands and stamped—and laughed again, and continued to laugh.

When the wedding dinner was over and we were assembled under the great spreading apple-tree at the corner of the house, chatting, joking and making merry, Bill, with a proud and fond look at Tildy, remarked dryly:

"My wife, there, Mrs. Kirk, is as stingy of 'er love an' kisses as ol' Mart Corner was of his grub. He had a boy that was a powerful big eater, an' it 'most worried the ol' man into consumption. Wasn't feared the boy'd make hisself sick, not by a heapin' bushel, but hated to see so much good grub disappearin'. Used to give the boy a copper to git him to go to bed without any supper, ~~man~~ then, the next mornin', he'd git the copper back by chargin' the half-starved boy fer his breakfast. An' I've an idee Tildy's goin' to try that kind of a game on me; but if she——"

"Bill Kirk," she snapped, shaking a warning finger at him, "if you don't b'have y'rself, I'll git a divorce inside of a week! You big dunce!"

Then her fat cheeks wrinkled into a grin, and the inevitable titter followed.

How I wish I might write, as did the romancers of a bygone age, "and they lived happily ever afterward," and thus conclude my story here and now! But it may not be. Life is an admixture of honey and gall; and a scant measure of the one but means a generous portion of the other. So I must go on and do what I set out to do—tell the truth, let it be sweet or bitter!

The years sped. Bill and Tildy remained with us; and David continued to make his home at our house, though he was away much of the time upon business connected with the Underground railroad. No children came to bless either union; and I, grown to a gawky, lanky lad, was the pampered pet of both couples. I attended school in winter and worked upon the farm with Vance and Bill in summer. Our affairs prospered and our deposits in the bank at Malconta grew and grew.

The muttering, threatening thunder of approaching civil war continued to roll up from the South, ever louder and clearer. The sentiment of abolition crystallized into the idea of emancipation; the crews of the Underground worked overtime, and the prospect, the certainty of war became the one subject of conversation.

David and Bill frequently spent whole evenings discussing these things which were uppermost in the minds of both. Vance read the papers, went about looking grave and thoughtful, but had little to say. It was plain to all of us that a silent but awful struggle was going on in his mind. For a long while none of us ventured to question him; but at

last, the mercurial Bill, in a fit of sheer bravado, said:

"Vance, I wish you'd answer me somethin'—jest one question."

"Well?"

"D'you think war's comin'?"

"Yes."

"An' when it *does* come, which side 're you goin' to be on?"

"I've answered your one question, Bill," Vance said soberly.

"Well, answer the other one, too."

"I will!"—with sudden resolution.—"When war comes, I'll cast my fortune and my influence—and risk my life, if necessary—with that side that at the time I think in the right. Now, ask me no more questions!"

"But," Bill persisted heedlessly, "where do you stand *now*? That's what I want to know."

Vance sprang to his feet, his blue eyes flaming, his hands clenched. Tildy caught her breath with a sharp gasp, and Ruth turned pale. Bill raised his hand apologetically—pleadingly.

"Don't git mad at me, Vance—please don't! I didn't mean to hurt y'r feelin's. You're all right, Vance—we all know that!"

Vance strode to the door and lifted the latch. Then he turned and said with forced calmness:

"It's all right, Bill; you meant no harm, no insult. I'm too sensitive, perhaps; but I can't help it. You and I are friends; let's remain such. Don't question me on the subject again."

When Vance had gone out into the night, to walk off his irritation—as he had done on a similar occasion years before—Bill muttered sorrowfully:

“I’d ort to ’ave had more gumption—dang it! Yes, I’d ort to ’ave had more good hoss sense!”

“True! True!”

And David nodded approval to the statement.

At last, from the murky political sky, came a blinding flash of lightning and an appalling clap of thunder. Fort Sumter had fallen! And almost immediately came Lincoln’s call for volunteers to aid in suppressing the rebellion. The news of the one event quickly followed the news of the other, and the consequent excitement and enthusiasm spread and traveled like fire in stubble. Down at Malconta the village band and several drum-corps paraded the streets, and tooted and drummed and fified from morning till night—and from night till morning, almost. Horsemen rode the county over, rousing the people. Meetings were held and patriotic speeches were made in village, hamlet, and schoolhouse.

Some one, or more, of our family went to the county-seat every day and brought back a budget of important news. But none of us enlisted. David was too old and I was too young, and Bill was disqualified on account of his infirmity. What our family did to show its loyalty or disloyalty must rest with Vance. What would he do? That was the question that caused us to lie awake nights, to stop talking and stare vacantly when in the midst of conversation; that caused Ruth to look wan and wor-

ried, and David to show the ravages of age as never before; that made the happy-go-lucky Bill morose and silent; and that hurried me from boyhood into manhood, at one shove. Yet, none of us dared to put that question to Vance!

Two or three companies of infantry were raised and sent to the front. Then the authorities commenced to recruit a company of cavalry. As promptly appeared, that was what Vance had been waiting for. As soon as he heard the news he mounted Kaintuck and rode down to the county-seat, without a word of his intention to any of us.

On his return he went to Ruth and said quietly: "I've made up my mind; I'm going to the war."

"On—on which side, Vance?" she asked timidly—anxiously, her soft brown eyes searching his face.

"Why, little woman!" he cried, starting as if stung. "Surely you haven't harbored the thought that I would—that I *could* fight against my country and my flag!"

She flung her arms around his neck, tears—tears of gladness at his noble decision, tears of sadness at thought of his leaving—raining down her cheeks.

When she had released him and sat wiping her eyes and bravely trying to smile, David and Bill went up to him and took his hands.

"God bless you, my boy!" murmured the old abolitionist, gulping and clearing his throat.

He could say no more, but turned away and left the room.

"You're made out o' the right kind o' stuff, Vance Chatham!" Bill muttered hoarsely. "I knowed •

you'd come out all right in the washin'—as the ol' woman said 'bout 'er petticoat. May the good Lord take keer o' you—an' send you back to us, safe an' sound!"

Tildy went over and kissed Ruth, her face convulsed, her mouth quivering; and as she passed Vance on her way to the kitchen, she patted him upon the back—but said not a word.

It was my turn. Striving hard to keep my feelings under—having a boyish, shame-faced dread of revealing them, I swaggered forward and remarked with assumed hardihood and carelessness:

"I'm glad you've made up your mind to go, Vance. I've always known you'd fight for the Union, when—when the time came. I—I wish I was old enough to go with—with you——"

I got no further. The next moment he had me in his strong arms—I sobbing unrestrainedly, he blinking back the moisture that dimmed his sight.

When we had partly recovered our composure, he held me from him at arm's length and said solemnly:

"Yes, Tom—my comrade, I'm going to fight for the Union. A patriot—an American—can do no less. The Union must be preserved at whatever cost; the right and the wrong of the original quarrel cuts no figure now. Slavery will be wiped out—it must be! Emancipation will come as a war necessity. I see it all clearly. And, Tom, every able-bodied man will be needed before this war is over—to save our country and our flag. The North is underrating the South; the war will be no half-holiday—as some are predicting and expecting. I'm going

now. Somehow, I feel that I shan't be allowed to fight all the way through. If—if I don't get back, or if——”

“Oh, Vance, don't!”

It was a wail of keenest anguish from Ruth. And she came up and put her arms around him, weeping bitterly.

After a momentary struggle with his emotion he resumed firmly: “If I get killed, Tom, you must look after Ruth. I'll depend upon you. If I become disabled and have to come home, and our country still needs the services of loyal men, I want you—as soon as you are old enough—to enlist and fill my place. Will you, Tom?”

I gave him my hand, and with it my solemn promise to prove faithful to the trust he reposed in me.

He left us the next morning, riding Kaintuck, as he had come to us. Bill and David would have accompanied him to Malconta, but he would not hear to it.

“I want to bid you good-by here at home,” he explained in answer to their questioning looks; “to go away feeling that I have left you all together—helping and comforting one another.”

Ruth followed him out to the road, however, and took leave of him there. When he had mounted Kaintuck and was about to set off, she threw her arms around the beautiful animal's neck and whispered in his ear. No doubt she was imploring the noble horse to carry his beloved master safely through battle and bring him back to her.

At the bend in the road he turned in the saddle

and waved us a final farewell. Then he was gone—taking our love and best wishes with him, and followed by our prayers.

We were sad and subdued after Vance's departure. The days and months dragged slowly, drearily. We heard from him frequently, almost every week bringing a letter. His communications were always sane and cheerful—assuring us of his good health, expressing satisfaction that he was receiving our letters, charging us to write often, and predicting the final success of the Union arms. Of course he wrote us of battles and skirmishes, of bootless struggles and sleepless nights. But rarely did he do more than hint of the hardships he endured, of the dangers he braved personally; and never did he utter complaint—never did he find fault with the officers over him; never did he express lack of faith in the wisdom of the head of the Government.

When he had been gone about a year we received a letter from him, saying:

“This time I must send you a bit of bad news—news that will cause you to grieve as sincerely as I do. Kaintuck was shot from under me, in the cavalry charge yesterday. I am not ashamed to say that tears came to my eyes as I saw death glazing his. Dear old Kaintuck! He died for his country—sacrificed on the altar of hate and prejudice. I feel his loss as I'd feel the loss of a human comrade—a personal friend.”

A few months later, all of a sudden, his letters quit coming. Three weeks passed—weeks of fearful anxiety and sickening expectancy. We almost

feared for Ruth's sanity during that awful time of suspense. Then came word from the captain of the company that Vance was seriously wounded and was in the hospital, and that he would be sent home on a furlough as soon as he was able to travel. Other letters followed from officers and comrades, telling of his bravery in battle, of his fortitude—and bearing us messages of love and assurance from our hero himself. At last came a communication from the surgeon, saying that Vance had been badly wounded in the hip by a piece of exploding shell, but that he was doing well and that he would be able to come home to us soon. The doctor closed his letter, however, with this terse and cruel statement:

“It is my duty to apprise you, though, that he will be a permanent cripple.”

Ruth read those awful words dry-eyed. Brave little woman! She did her best to hide from us the deep horror, the keen anguish, the poignant grief she felt.

And when finally he returned to us—wan, bearded, emaciated and half-helpless—like the wise and loving angel she was, she spoke of his injury as a passing affair, cheered him, encouraged him, and strove in every way to make him comfortable and happy, to keep his spirit sweet and hopeful. She went so far, even,—when he had again become strong enough to move about the house and drag his enfeebled body out into the sunshine,—as to pat his crutches and say that she loved them, since they must be a part of him.

And Vance? He understood her motives, her de-

signs and desires perfectly, and was at all times patient and cheerful. He complained not; he sighed not. God alone knew what he suffered mentally and physically—the strong, active man reduced to abject helplessness, almost!

True to my promise, a short time after Vance's return I enlisted and went to fill his place in the army. I shall not dwell upon my military record or experience. Let it suffice that I went in a private and came out a private, that I served till the end of the war, and returned home a bronzed and bearded young man—and ridiculously sound and well.

Of our family—and how some of us had prided ourselves upon our patriotism, our Union sentiments, our loyalty!—Vance Chatham, whose sympathies were with the section of his nativity, was the only one who made a real sacrifice for the whole country. But, ah, I forget Ruth!

Shortly after the war was over, Bill and Tildy were attacked by that nervous, restless malady so common to the native American—"Western fever." Strange illusions and hallucinations beset their brains. The prairies of the great West lured them; and, in spite of our arguments and entreaties, they packed their few belongings and emigrated to Kansas. There, for the first few years, they underwent untold privations and hardships. They wrote us frankly of their trials and troubles, but not once did they appeal to us for help. Nevertheless, each year we sent them substantial remembrances of our interest in their welfare. Finally a succession of fruitful, prosperous seasons fell to

their lot; and Bill's letters became indicative of the chipper, care-free Bill of old.

Vance and Ruth looked upon me as their son and heir; and nothing would do them but I must go away to college. Desirous of pleasing them—yet loath to leave them, and having little taste for bookish things—I went. David and the new hired-help remained with them.

Four years of college life passed pleasantly—if not very profitably; and once more I was back in the old home with those I loved. Then Vance and Ruth commenced to urge me to go into business at Malconta, or some other city of my choice; and to hint to me that I ought to begin to think of marrying and making a home for myself. As to going into business, I told them I would give the matter consideration when they made up their minds to leave the farm and go with me; as to marrying, I hooted at the idea. I had no intention, no desire to marry. And I may as well confess—as I am laying bare my heart—that, barring a few boyish fancies, I have never loved but one woman, my cousin Ruth!

Now, let me hurry over the closing scenes. For my heart is full to bursting; and my pen trails nervously and erratically.

Five—ten—fifteen bonny summers and blustery winters came and went; and we four—Vance and Ruth, David and I—continued to dwell together in the old home. If, under the circumstances, we could not be ecstatically joyful at all times, we were at least serenely happy. David was the first to leave our little family circle. An old, old man, full of

years and good works, and mellowed by age until he was as simple and lovable as a child, he bade us good-by and fell asleep.

Next came Vance's turn. Bravely, as he had met every emergency of life, he met the final one. For worlds I would not call him back to the life of his later years—to have him again endure pain and death; but, oh, that I might see him just once more, standing erect and proud in his perfect manhood!

“He softly hurried out and shut the door;
And all my soul with bitter anguish shook!
I strive to pierce the darkness, o'er and o'er;
'Tis not for me to know the course he took!
Yet biding here in grief I can but know
That blue and kindly skies above him bend;
And whither he has journeyed I shall go.
He—was—my—friend!”

Ruth alone remained to me, to love, to comfort, to care for; and she not for long. She had nothing left to live for; and she made no effort to combat the insidious complaint that gnawed at her vitals. We left the farm to the care of the hired-help and went to Malconta to live; but she soon grew restless, dissatisfied, and begged me to take her back to the old home. There, but one short twelve months after Vance's death, she peacefully breathed her last.

My dear ones all gone, I rented the place—I could not gain the consent of my mind to sell it—and removed to the city, where I now reside. I have prospered; I am measurably happy and contented. But I have never married; and I live in the past more than in the present. It may not be well; but who

knows? It is my way; and it may be God's will and design.

At rare intervals I revisit the scenes of my youth and early manhood; I cannot bear to go often. And each time I stand beside the grassy mounds in the old graveyard on the windy ridge, these lines of an obscure poet come to my mind:

"Ah! life is but a comedy—
A mad and merry comedy!—
When years are few,
And sun and dew
A-glitter light the scene;
When fays and goblins antic
Indulge in pranks romantic,
And lads and lassies linger—
Making love upon the green;
When love's stream flows the clearest,
The purest and the dearest,
And every lip is drinking—
And every soul a-thirst;
Then life is but a comedy—
A comedy, at first!

"But life's a melodrama true—
A stirring melodrama, too!—
When blades are drawn,
And brain and brawn
Are ready for the fray;
When groans and laughter mingle,
And spurs and scabbards jingle,
And sheen and shadow—half and half—
Compose the busy day;
When joy shakes hands with sorrow,
And clown and villain borrow
Each other's robes, to foul the plot—
And part to meet again;
Then life's a melodrama true—
A melodrama, then!

"Yet life is but a tragedy—
A grim and grewsome tragedy!—
When lights are out,
And cheer and shout
No longer din the stage;
When youth and love are hated,
And sin and sorrow mated,
And Charon's bony fingers
Clutch the skinny hand of age;
When hours and moments speeding,
And days and years receding,
Jeer mockingly adown the path
That leads into the past;
Then life is but a tragedy—
A tragedy, at last!"

THE END

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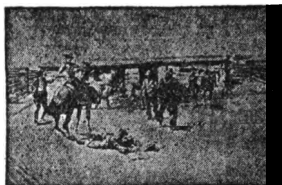
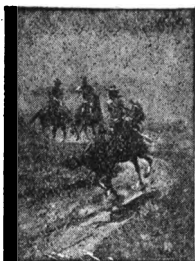
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